



# Co-ordination and partnership to promote revitalisation of multiple former coal mining sites

## Insights from Limburg, Belgium

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# Table of contents

<b>Introduction: setting the scene .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Protection and re-use, often not an obvious relationship .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Co-ordination of revitalisation plans and activities across former Limburg mining sites.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The related partnership models .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1987 – 1993: the classical reconversion, but no new narrative.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1994 – 2000: cooperation based on content .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2000 – now: municipalities do it for themselves .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Since 2019 / 2020: restoring connection.....</b>	<b>6</b>

## About the author

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## Introduction: setting the scene

It can hardly be imagined in 2021 that, when the coal mines in Belgian Limburg were closed at the end of the 1980s, neither the mining company nor the government had a plan to do anything creative with the rather remarkable collection of buildings of the mines. A complete demolition was soon started, while in reality the heritage was a huge asset in the reconversion of the region.

Sustained activism by local associations and special efforts - often in silence - by public officials / civil servants of the various authorities have, however, led to a fundamental turnaround. The legal protection as 'monument' of a considerable number of mining buildings is without doubt the most important decision of the Flemish government in the reconversion of the entire area, apart from the closure of the coal mines themselves. In 1993 and 1994, over the seven closed coal mines, 45 industrial buildings and installations were protected. Later, approximately 20 more buildings (a number with a previous civic use) were given the status of protected buildings. The vision behind this government decision: to preserve the most unique constructions for posterity at each mining site, so that a representative image of the entire mining industry was created. At the same moment it was decided to keep intact one mining site as much as possible: Beringen. There were various reasons for this: the Beringen mine was one of the last to close, so it was still complete and representative of the industry itself; the entire site is relatively compact compared to the other coal mines; the garden residential district and the slag heap are in the immediate vicinity; and protections had already been pronounced for the garden district. Moreover, there was a strong historical awareness on site due to the development of the mining museum. The Beringen coal mine, as has been confirmed in all subsequent policy plans and declarations at regional level, had to provide the most complete picture of a coal mine and the 'gateway' to the Limburg mining region.

In fact, and in overview, the Flemish Government created a park of industrial archaeological heritage of world scale: a zone of 40 kilometers from Beringen to Eisden-Maasmechelen with seven historically architectural and cultural characteristic mining settlements, almost 70 legally protected industrial monuments, a population of 200,000 people and typical 'man-made-landscape' with shaft towers, slag heaps and so on. However, policymakers lacked the awareness and emotional-political capacity to fully grasp and develop this opportunity.

## Protection and re-use, often not an obvious relationship

It may be said that Limburg, even after the historic decisions of 1993 and 1994, has struggled greatly with the 'fait accompli' protection of its mining heritage. In the absence of a proactive spatial policy, it was therefore not easy to give support to the redevelopment of that heritage. Many local and regional political representatives were strongly opposed to the 'top down' decision of the Flemish government, which made the search for a meaningful approach more difficult.

However, there were commendable efforts in the mid-1990s under the impetus of the Mining Region Platform<sup>1</sup> that designed a spatial vision for the region and an 'operation master plan' for the Kempen Coal Mines (Beringen and Eisden sites). As a result of this and given the extensive contacts between the mayors of the mining municipalities in the Regional Platform, an informal coordination and consensus arose regarding the main themes for the re-use of each coal mine. Moreover, this platform formulated a connecting and overarching project, the 'Kaderproject Kolenspoor / Framework project COALTRACK', which would bring together the renewal of the mining region in one coordinated bottom-up campaign.

But in practice, formal operational coordination and a detailed overarching vision remained absent, mainly because of political divisions and the individual focus of project promoters on the 'subsidy pots'. Ultimately, each mine site and each mine building were given a new purpose in a manner that did not optimize synergies across the sites. Fortunately, the sites benefited from numerous good ideas from project initiators and on subsidies from the Flemish and European governments. But 30 years after the closure, observers still feel that Limburg saw the mining sites too much as a 'problem' and too little as an 'opportunity'. A well-coordinated regional park of repurposed industrial heritage could have had a significant international appearance / profile in the 21st century (Quod non until today, unfortunately).

However, progress continues. In 2021 (after several years of study) the provincial government has rediscovered 'the Kolenspoor / COALTRACK' - an abandoned railway line - as the sensible and intelligent connecting factor and opportunity for former mining sites. A new campaign is being launched to organize coordination and joint communication. The municipalities of the mining region are invited to be a partner in the new campaign. So, the

1 The Mining Region Platform or Regional Platform Mining Region, was a strategic collaboration initiative between the municipalities of the region, formed especially to tackle common challenges such as spatial planning and redevelopment of the former coalmine sites

hope emerges that the development ideas / insights that were already existing in the 1990s will finally evoke the real power and opportunity of Limburg's collective mining heritage.

Ultimately, the efforts of the local authorities, at the end of the 1990s, were decisive for the re-use of the mining heritage. In five of the seven mining sites, the municipal authorities have acquired the ownership of the coal mine, which in a few decades has led to strong projects that go by the names C-Mine (Winterslag), THOR park (Waterschei), ZLDR Luchtfabriek (Zolder), Greenville (Houthalen), La Biomista (Zwartberg).

**Relevant websites for more information on the projects mentioned:**

- <https://www.c-mine.be/en/> (Coalmine Winterslag in Genk: culture)
- <https://thorpark.be/en/> (Coalmine Waterschei in Genk: energy and education)
- <https://www.labiomista.be/en/> (Coalmine Zwartberg in Genk: art and biodiversity)
- <https://greenville.be/> (Coalmine Houthalen: cleantech business incubator)
- <https://www.visitheusden-zolder.be/en/zldr-air-factory> (Coalmine Zolder: heritage, culture, education and SME)

The approach of the Beringen mining site and the Eisden coalmine differ from this, because the initiative was taken by the original owner, KS (Kempen Coalmines), later the Limburg Reconversion Company / LRM<sup>2</sup>. Beringen and Eisden are now 'leisure and retail- and heritage parks'.

**Relevant websites for more information on the projects mentioned:**

- <https://www.lrm.be/en> (Investment Company)
- <http://www.bemine.be/> (Coalmine Beringen: leisure and heritage site)
- <https://terhills.be/en/> (Coalmine Eisden: holiday park, shopping and nature development)

<sup>2</sup> The Limburg Reconversion Company / LRM is the legal successor of the State Mining Company. It is a financial investment company, with the Flemish government as sole shareholder, that invests in strategic projects for the region.

## Co-ordination of revitalisation plans and activities across former Limburg mining sites

If one defines the word co-ordination as follows:

- the process of organizing people or groups so that they work together properly and well
- the harmonious functioning of parts for effective results

the Limburg experience is only partly successful for the simple reason that formal, intense co-ordination in the field of spatial planning and project-development in Limburg and Flanders is limited. There is a greater emphasis on 'organizing good projects in an entrepreneurial way', rather than 'drawing up and implementing a well-coordinated plan to create a bigger and better regional effect'.

However, in recent history in the Limburg mining region two interesting platforms were in action:

The Regional Platform Mining Area, a close cooperation between 7 municipalities between 1994 and 2000.

The RLKM, Regional Landscape Hoge Kempen, a partnership with 12 municipalities, the province, the National Nature Agency (Flemish Government) and several private institutions and NGO's. see: <http://www.rlkm.be/en> The aim is to develop the largest nature area of Limburg situated in the eastern corner of the territory that includes 4 of the 7 mining settlements. Their main project is developing and managing the National Park 'Hoge Kempen'. This coordinating partnership, that has both broad political support and is being managed as an independent company with a public goal, is the best example of a working partnership in Limburg.<sup>3</sup>

Co-ordination between the different mining sites remains a challenge and ultimately good co-ordination will be the factor of success, especially now that the individual coal mining sites have a new destination / purpose.

The creation of the redevelopment plans for coalmines is done in a creative and thorough way for the individual sites. For most of the sites the role of the municipality and the person of the Mayor as 'leader' has been

<sup>3</sup> RLKM however is only dealing with the development of nature in Limburg and not with the redevelopment of the actual former mining sites

decisive. And the second factor has been input from interested external ‘partners’ of which we see three types: 1/ NGOs, creatives & activists; 2/ independent governmental agencies and knowledge institutions (scientific institutions and universities); and 3/ private entrepreneurs.

## The related partnership models

In the post-mining period – it is now about 30 years after the closure of the last mine in Limburg - we can see different forms of partnerships that have been established and have operated for finite periods. The fact that partnerships have mostly been temporary is due to the fact that often the outcome of elections has changed previous ways of working. ‘New people in charge’ in Belgium often means clearing out structures and replacing them with something new. That has certainly been a factor in the period of reconversion.

### 1987 – 1993: the classical reconversion, but no new narrative

In the first period of the reconversion (1987 – 1993) the approach was rather ‘classical’: demolishing legacy infrastructure, building new infrastructure, inward investment, seed money for start-ups, social schemes for mineworkers and their families (youngsters and women).

Most of the partnerships were focused on ‘distribution’ of money (subsidies or public investment) and not on the creation of a plan (vision of the future) that would have supported local development. The good thing, however, was that these ‘partnerships’ involved all levels of public authorities and were very successful in organizing co-financing schemes so that a lot of money was attracted from EU sources and matched with national, regional and local public funds. It was an era of significant financial sources for major public actions, but with no strategy towards the coalmining sites themselves other than demolishing and sanitation works.

1987 - 1993 was also a period of worldwide growth that could be incorporated in the regional approach of reconversion. But the region did not create a vision or a new narrative, nor were local authorities or the public significantly involved in re-imagining the affected communities.

### 1994 – 2000: cooperation based on content

The second period of development is marked by the partnership of local authorities based on their desire to create a common vision of the future and work on related policy and action.

This partnership was built on the commitment of the mayors of 6 municipalities that decided themselves that collective bottom-up action could bring new energy and a joint vision as a driver for change. In this period, the base was laid for what until today remains the ‘informal masterplan of the mining region of Limburg’.

This new partnership was the result of a period of open conferences on relevant themes that until that moment (1993) were not covered by the official reconversion-bodies or partnerships. These themes included: redevelopment of the mining sites, regional spatial planning, involvement of people and local communities, public safety and crime. Dozens of individuals, community development workers, people from the unions, schools, civil servants / public officials participated in these open conferences, local workshops and communications / campaign meetings to motivate people.

The main characteristics of this partnership, the Regional Platform Mining Area, were:

- Strong commitment of mayors to meet each other (at least every month).
- Study, input of external experts, international exchange and occasional study visits and involvement of creatives and facilitators.
- Co-ordination (and guidance) by a (very) small professional but very dedicated team.
- An informal and pleasant atmosphere: ‘the joy of fighting the same battle’ (and occasionally a good beer together).

The main projects:

- Informal master planning between municipalities with, as a result, each coalmine working around a different main theme.
- The creation of a connecting concept, the COALTRACK (Kolenspoor). That is a derelict railway that earlier served the coalmines. The symbolic redevelopment of it was meant to serve as a binding factor: a motivating brand and campaigning-model that got people and structures enthusiastic about the common cause in the region and about the common challenges and vision

of the future. It for example involved a cultural festival celebrating the transition of the region. Also, the creation experimental / temporary projects in mining buildings and creating innovative plans for buildings and projects (such as social economy projects).

The Regional Platform around the year 2000 stopped, mainly because of political reasons. Higher authorities saw the dynamics of the growing bottom – up vision and the coherence of the mining communities as a ‘disturbing’ factor vis-à-vis the older way of working: distribution of funds among individual projects.

## 2000 – now: municipalities do it for themselves

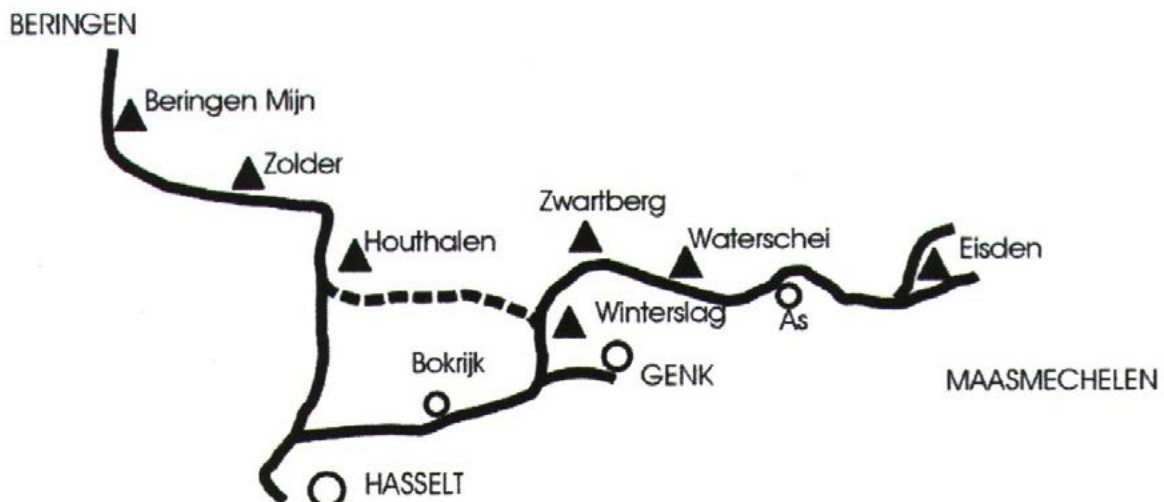
But even if the structure had disappeared the period of the Regional Platform had changed the regional scene for good. The municipalities started to act much more as confident actors in the transition of the economy and started to work with the new insights that were gained:

- Heritage as an asset for development.
- Sustainable development as an explicit goal.
- More and more attention for citizen involvement.
- To create the concepts for redevelopment of the mining sites themselves and then starting to actively search for the capital investments.

And consequently for 5 of the 7 coalmines, acquiring the ownership of the sites and thus taking over the historic role of the Mining company.

## Since 2019 / 2020: restoring connection

In recent years, a new campaign has developed: the new COALTRACK. The old idea of connecting the region internally around a central new narrative has returned due to the initiative of a group of planning experts and civil servants from the department of spatial planning. It is too soon to state if linking of the sites through the repurposing of an abandoned railway line is going to be successful. But the initiative is strongly led by the provincial government and the mining municipalities are participating in a new partnership around the concept of the COALTRACK. Many project promoters on mining sites have high expectations of the new initiative. Success will depend on the quality of the leadership and the will to invest in talking to the people: the combination of a TOP – DOWN and a BOTTOM – UP strategy.



The COALTRACK