

COMMON WORK PROGRAMME

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PIONEERING

COOPERATION

COLOPHON

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1.

BENELUX

PIONEERING COOPERATION

Thanks to enhanced political support, in the past few years the Benelux cooperation has contributed to better living and working conditions for citizens and companies. Issues addressed included smoother cross-border people and job mobility, more efficient road transport, the development of alternative energy sources and better cooperation between our police departments.

Today and in the future, the Benelux countries are faced with considerable social, economic, security and health challenges, which require durable innovative choices and solutions. The individual Member States do not always have the resources or capacity to take on these challenges on their own. Regional cooperation partnerships such as the Benelux Union often are able to offer what is necessary to develop better and more efficient solutions.

Furthermore, the Benelux Union can be a pioneer in Europe and play a major stimulating and facilitating role in regional integration processes as a stepping stone for further European cooperation. In the past the Benelux cooperation

partnership has proved that it fervently fulfils this role, for instance in the field of energy.

Every four years the Benelux Union establishes a common work programme containing the strategic framework and priorities for the collaboration between the countries. Annual plans then convert those programmes into concrete actions and projects.

For the 2017-2020 period our governments advocate realistic and pragmatic objectives. The collaboration in the Benelux Union focuses on removing barriers and obstacles, creating economies of scale and supporting discussion platforms similar to expertise and knowledge networks.

During the preparations for this Common Work Programme a round of broad consultation was held among the participants in the cross-border cooperation in the Benelux, i.e. stakeholders, social partners and civil society. The wide response showed a fervent desire and broad support for close cooperation in order to tackle the coun-

tries' challenges and fully assume the leading European role.

The Common Work Programme 2017-2020 reiterates the anchoring of the Benelux Union in the EU. It is the governments' wish to remain a driver of European integration and make the cross-border cooperation between the three countries even more effective in practice.

Committee of Ministers





2.

SUSTAINABLE AND DIGITAL

The Benelux is an economically dynamic and densely populated region and the beating heart of Europe, with 5.6% of the European population (28 million residents) and 7.9% of the joint EU GDP (EUR 36,000/resident) on no more than 1.7% of the total surface of the EU.

The Benelux countries are facing important joint challenges in the areas of safety and security (in the broadest sense) and economic development. Said economic development needs to be sustainable, as described in – among other publications – the Sustainable Development Goals of the ‘2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. Therefore in the next four years the Benelux countries wish to take concrete steps together to enhance their internal market and create more safety and security.

This joint approach will be both sustainable and digital.

Following the three summits held in 2015 about Disaster Risk Reduction (Sendai), Sustainable Development (Addis Ababa) and Climate (Paris), it goes without saying that existing as well as new measures must be ‘risk-informed investments’ in order to be able to strive for a sustainable, climate-resilient and therefore safe society. Sustainability is an important precondition for achieving our goal of perpetuating and enhancing our internal market and social security and for shaping cooperation on the issue of safety.

Companies and industries will continue to innovate in order to maintain and expand their competitiveness. Also, the Benelux countries will have to keep working towards creating a low-carbon economy and must continuously adapt to climate change. The damage caused to the energy, transportation and industrial sectors and society by the sometimes extreme weather conditions in the EU is currently estimated at EUR 3.5 billion a year, an amount that is expected to increase tenfold by 2100 if no changes are implemented. Given the fact that these figures do not include the economic damage and safety risks, it is obvious that infrastructures need to be climate- and future-proof. After all: eco-systems form an inextricable part of our environment; they are essential for our long-term well-being and play a vital role in future social-economic developments in areas including food, water, wood, air quality, flood prevention, etc. Lost natural ecosystem services will have to be replaced by costly alternatives – even more so at a Benelux scale given the constant tension between the individual industries in our very densely populated small area. Policy makers and citizens must all become aware of these issues.

The conversion to a sustainable economy will affect the market forces. A circular economy will limit the use of natural resources and create economic added value.

Educating and raising awareness among companies and citizens are key elements in shaping the transition towards a more sustainable society.

The digital society creates considerable advantages and challenges for market forces and security. Digital communication is fast and accurate; distances and (country) borders play a lesser role day by day.

For instance: electronic payments help remove border barriers and contribute to smoother market forces. Online consumer purchases (e-commerce) take a growing share and borders no longer matter. The majority of all government communications now occurs digitally, both with citizens (more than 60%) and companies (more than 90%). Cross-border healthcare is becoming easier as a result of electronic exchange of medical information and remote care. Digital information facilitates the cross-border job market operations, but at the same time creates new challenges in the area of cybercrime and fraud.

Concrete actions will integrate these new realities into the policy areas described below.





3.

POLICY AREAS

Through closer cooperation the Benelux countries strive for better market functioning and more safety and security. Consequently, the Benelux cooperation is structured according to these two main policy areas, both of which contain a number of policy themes.

1. INTERNAL MARKET & ECONOMY

A strong Benelux market increases prosperity and strengthens the ties between countries, citizens and companies. In view of recent challenges such as the economic and financial crises, this focal concept deserves and requires regular updating. The recent security problems also affect employees and companies.

Proper functioning of the market will create jobs and stimulates innovative economic development initiatives. This is beneficial to citizens, companies and governments. For this reason, in the coming years our countries wish to invest in a better functioning labour market, in more renewable energy and better integration thereof in the energy market, and in multimodality for more efficient transport of persons and goods.

Working in a borderless labour market

The complexity and poor understanding of the differences in regulations on both sides of the border constitute a major obstacle for the development of a dynamic

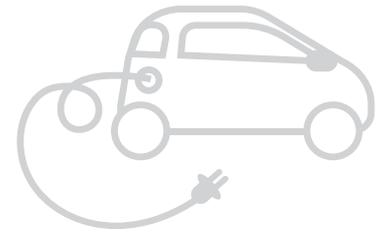
cross-border labour market. It unnecessarily limits the freedom of choice for citizens and companies and leads to missed opportunities in finding a suitable job and filling vacancies. Country borders should not be an obstacle in the search for the right job by the right person. Cross-border cooperation must prevent and resolve such obstacles.

Currently 37% of the total number of EU frontier workers work in the Benelux and surrounding areas. 35,000 Belgian citizens work in Luxembourg, while 37,000 Belgian citizens cross the border to work in the Netherlands each day. In addition, 12,000 Dutch and close to a thousand Luxembourg residents work in Belgium. As regards cross-border professional mobility the Benelux is undoubtedly a hot spot in Europe.

As the European pioneer, the Benelux cooperation takes varied action to remove the existing obstacles. For instance, in 2015 our governments have introduced automatic level recognition of higher education degrees. In addition, efforts are made to provide frontier workers in the entire Benelux border area with information about their rights and obligations in a reliable and accessible manner.

The Benelux countries aim at making the labour and services market 'border neutral' so as to help towards smoother searches for suitable jobs in a neighbouring country. The Benelux cooperation seeks to achieve this through improved access to information about social rights and fiscal issues for employees and employers on either side of the borders.

Furthermore, our countries stimulate the individual mobility of job seekers and students and the choices for employers through expansion of the automatic diploma recognition for higher education, improved transferability of professional qualifications, simplification of cross-border traineeships and removal of unnecessary administrative obstacles. Every year at least 200,000 patients in the Benelux enjoy healthcare in a bordering country. Our countries improve patient mobility and optimise the available care by tackling the obstacles regarding cross-border healthcare.



Safeguarding future-oriented mobility

In a densely populated area with intensive economic activity such as the Benelux, the development of new and future-proof transport means is of crucial importance. Such development should aim at optimum distribution of the ways of transportation (road, rail, water, air) and investments should focus on transport means that are accessible to everyone in order to retain accessibility of the cities, economic hubs and border areas and safeguard the quality of life in the area.

At a logistics level the Benelux has developed into a coherent and cross-border hub and a gateway to Europe. A study carried out in 2016 shows that the Benelux territory – with a total surface of less than 2% of the European Union – represents 78% of the inland navigation of the EU, 24% of its air transport, 21% of its maritime shipping, 7% of EU road transport and 6% of all EU rail transport. Much of this involves cross-border traffic. Furthermore, the three Benelux countries rank in the top ten of the world logistics list.

Only if we coordinate our innovations in a framework of sustainability and climate awareness will we be able to guarantee economic growth and prosperity. Optimum deployment of all the transportation modes is a must.

The Benelux cooperation aims at further improvement of the accessibility of cities, economic hubs and border regions and the quality of life of the area. This involves both

passenger and freight transport, for private as well as public transport.

All types of obstacles for easy cross border traffic and for achieving the optimum modal shift (regulations, administrative procedures, technical obligations, etc.) are tackled simultaneously, thus increasing the opportunities for rail transport and inland shipping.

Completing the single market

Ever since its inception the Benelux has had the desire to realise a single market. That ambition is still current, but many obstacles still exist. Under article 350 TFEU the Benelux countries continue to strive for annihilation of those obstacles.

The single market will create a market area which in terms of scale and scope will equal that of the large countries of the EU. This will increase opportunities for growth and job creation. Furthermore, Benelux efforts to remove the borders have a catalyst effect on the internal market forces in the EU. Developing a level playing field and conditions for fair competition are a must in this context.

Furthermore, our countries will continue to focus on improved cross-border access to (digital) goods and services for citizens and companies. In this context, needless administrative obstacles will be removed, thus creating a cross-border environment allowing for development of innovative networks and services.

Special attention will be given to the circular economy, which strives for more efficient use of products, goods and services in all the phases of the life cycle as well as for reduced impact on the environment. With this new model, growth can be created and innovation and research stimulated – all for the enhancement of individual wellbeing.

Countries cannot safeguard the proper functioning of their own energy market and supply security on their own. At the pentilateral forum and hence also at other regional and European levels the Benelux countries have a driving role in creating cross-border connections and integrating the national energy markets. This allows for cost efficiency (lowest possible energy prices), for dealing with changes in energy production (flexibility) and for improvement of supply security. This is the only way in which – together with the European neighbouring countries – one single internal energy market can be widened and deepened as a building block for the Energy Union.

Promoting active tackling of climate change risks and the conversion to a sustainable energy system and a sustainable economy is an important requirement in this context. Further focus on renewable energy and alternative fuel forms an inherent part of this.



2. SAFETY/SECURITY & SOCIETY

The dissipating borders contribute to the internationalisation of society, but also add complexity and reduce clarity for citizens and companies. Said internationalisation and growing complexity lead to an increased sense of vulnerability and a feeling of real or alleged unsafety.

The threat of terrorism and cross-border criminality are two factors enhancing that feeling of unsafety. In the Benelux, consequences of catastrophes and other crises often also go beyond borders. Adequate cooperation beyond borders, in the first place between neighbouring countries, is of vital importance for tackling these challenges.

The countries cooperate intensively on a wide range of these safety and security themes to create a safe Benelux area and also gradually expand it to the rest of Europe. The three Benelux countries have a pioneering role and often are a testing ground cum source of inspiration for Europe. The countries want to maintain this pioneering role in the future.

For more than ten years the Benelux countries have been working together successfully combating tax fraud in a wide range of industries. Over the last few years they also tackled the fight against social dumping and social fraud.

Given the social-economic challenges the Benelux countries are facing, in addition we must enhance the social fabric in our society. After

all: the Benelux is also synonymous with promoting equal opportunities for all citizens. For this reason it is important to keep investing in increased social cohesion and in public health policy, so as to be able to guarantee proper integration of all citizens.

Combining the forces of police, justice and other services

Cross-border criminality is taking new shapes. The multitude of borders and the differences with respect to counterterrorism and crime fighting methods constitute real obstacles for preventative and investigative work.

The many years of cooperation and the trust built up between the security services in the Benelux countries provide excellent results at the levels of operational cooperation, law enforcement and the approach towards urgent interventions on both sides of the border. This cooperation must be developed further so as to also tackle the new challenges, and this should not be hindered by borders or differences in regulations.

The Benelux countries wish to further optimise their cooperation as regards security and extend it to other areas, such as the judiciary. Furthermore, the fight against human trafficking and attention for its victims remain of major importance. The deepening of the partnerships with the local administrations in order to more quickly and effectively fight crime phenomena via the administrative

approach to combating crime, is being continued.

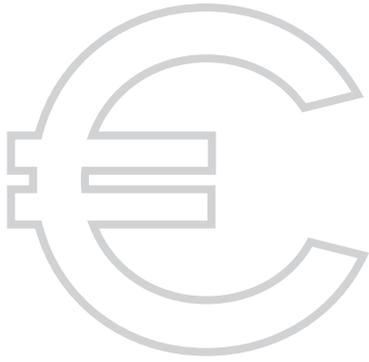
Our countries are making further arrangements and exchanging best practices regarding the protection of personal data in order to safeguard the right to privacy protection on the one hand, and fight crime on the other.

Proper exchange of knowledge and information about the options (such as smooth cross-border information exchange and radio communication) and the risks (such as cybercrime) associated with the digitisation of our society remain necessary in order to offer suitable protection to citizens, companies and authorities.

In addition, countries should study the desires and options for sharing information about 'new phenomena', such as radicalised persons.

The countries work closely together to address the major challenges of migration, including the return of migrants, border control and the multidisciplinary approach to human trafficking and smuggling of human beings.





Common action during crises and disasters

In our society, potential disasters and crises form part of everybody's lives. Our citizens have concerns not only as regards the safety of nuclear plants, but also about things as food safety, cybercrime and climate adaptation.

For instance, extreme weather conditions seriously endangering citizens and causing considerable economic damage are increasingly frequent. Given the dense population of our three countries, the consequences often extend beyond borders and it is important that citizens become aware of the challenges associated with climate change.

An inventory drawn up in 2016 of the cross-border risks in the Benelux requires additional elaboration and deepening.

Efficient cross-border Benelux cooperation is indispensable for the development of scenarios that help decrease the risk of disasters and alleviate the consequences of crises.

The Benelux countries ensure smooth and efficient information exchange in the event of urgent

crises. Nevertheless, further cooperation is necessary in order to identify and analyse all cross-border crisis situations with a view to better vigilance and preparedness.

Furthermore, the Benelux countries continue their commitment to operational collaboration in interventions, so as to ensure that coordinated mutual assistance can be provided (emergency services, ambulances, etc.).

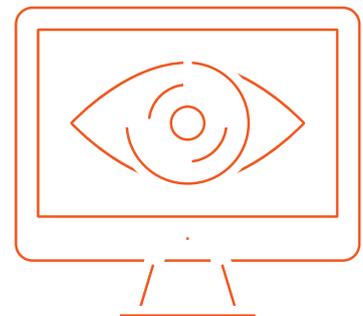
Fighting fraud

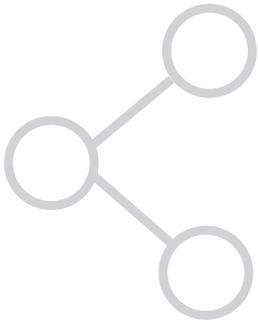
Fraudsters can put the differences in regulations between the three countries to personal use to circumvent certain obligations and create a benefit for themselves. Such situations undermine fair competition and affect public finance. Consequently it is of utmost importance to provide joint action and control.

In the last few years the Benelux countries have shown that their cooperation and the ensuing results can serve as an example for all of Europe. For instance: in 2015 the Benelux project for combating VAT Carousel Fraud was suggested to the EU, and the Benelux collaboration often serves as a reference in the fight against social dumping.

Only by cooperating beyond borders and regionally can the fight against fraud be furthered efficiently.

In the coming years the Benelux countries will continue to focus on the joint fight against (large-scale) tax and social fraud, but also against social dumping – which leads to exploitation of employees and undermines the social system – as well as against more specific fraud such as business scams and healthcare fraud.





4.

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Several developments require collaboration with neighbouring countries and regions beyond the outer borders of the Benelux. As regards energy and road transportation the Benelux countries have been working together with other neighbouring countries such as Germany and France for many years. Since 2008, there is fruitful cooperation with the German North Rhine-Westphalia region, which was laid down in a joint political statement. Said cooperation addresses items such as transfrontier work, energy, environment, territory and safety and security.

With the ambition to be a European pioneer comes the requirement that the Benelux countries also cooperate with border regions, with other international organisations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the OECD as well as with cooperation partnerships beyond their borders such as the Greater Region, the Scheldt Council, the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, the Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai Eurometropolis, etc. In that context the Benelux countries actively support territorial/local authorities seeking structural cross-border cooperation partnerships.

In the next four years, for each project our countries will check which other (federated) states or international organisations may qualify for closer cooperation.



Benelux

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