

living in the village communities. In this study the framework of land grabbing was applied (Borras and Franco, 2012; Franco and Borras, Eds. 2013), analysing 'legal irregularities, non-residence, centralization in decision-making structures, land as investment object, decision-power concentration, and de-facto limited land market access' (Bunkus and Theesfeld, 2018, 16) to study whether the negative consequences of Large-Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLA) could also be found in the German context. The found 'rather social subtle effects' (Bunkus and Theesfeld, 2018, 16) Especially,

'De-facto access to land is also an issue, when an average farmer has a lesser chance to buy agricultural land due to raising prices or too large plots offered, when confronted with capital-intensive investors with or without agricultural background and sometimes not even coming from the region.' (Bunkus and Theesfeld, 2018, 16)

Government organisations selling land to the highest bidder support the process that economic power rules; selling land in smaller lots is a first step taken to make the land more affordable for smaller farmers. This may however not be sufficient; in the German context it is highly relevant to consider the lease market as well, as according to Bunkus and Theesfeld (2018) 71% of the cultivated land is leased in the East of Germany

5.2.1.2 Zeeuws-Vlaanderen (NL)

Zeeuws-Vlaanderen is the only NUTS 3 area in the Netherlands that is classified as rural by EUROSTAT. It is located between the estuary of the Westerschelde and the Belgian border. Until 2003 it was only connected by ferry or a detour via Belgium (Antwerp) with the rest of the Netherlands, which contributed to its relative isolation. Cross-border commuting was very low (Meijers *et al.*, 2013). Currently it is connected with a toll tunnel, and as there is only one other road where toll is being paid by the car drivers in the Netherlands, and there is no alternative road, this is contested as contributing to a more isolated development (Meijers *et al.*, 2013; Meijers *et al.*, 2018). In relation to the soil (*zavel*, that is, sandy clay) and traditional crops (flask, which is of relative minor importance nowadays) it is connected to Flanders. Although, the local dialect originally has been Flemish (Will, 2004), after four centuries of a border, '...the southern phenomena are disappearing (...). In this respect one could say that the people of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen become more and more people of Zeeland.' (Will, 2004, 283) Furthermore, the border marks a strong difference in landscape and culture (Van den Berghe *et al.*, 2020). South of the border there are the cities of Gent, Brugge and upstream the Schelde, Antwerp, and a web of suburban sprawl along the roads connecting towns and suburbs (De Decker, 2011). Zeeuws-Vlaanderen is predominantly an open area, in which population is concentrated in villages and towns. Traditionally there have been services oriented towards the Belgian population across the border making use of different identities and regulations, including restaurants accommodating busloads of Belgians to eat mussels, a large furniture firm, sex shops and cannabis-smoking facilities. There is also industrial development in a zone along the canal towards the harbour of Gent. Over the past decades, cross-border land market exchanges have taken place. In response to a perspective of population decline communities have advertised housing in this area to families across the border. Many of these families stay primarily oriented towards Belgium, including that their kids go to school in their area of origin. This relationships had as result that during the Global Financial Crisis around 2008, the housing market in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen did not follow the

deep stagnation of the rest of the Netherlands (Meijers *et al.*, 2013). In Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, the housing prices dropped only 6% after 2008; in the Netherlands, prices dropped over 15% and it took longer to reach the 2008 price level (NVM, 2020). So, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen staid more in par with the more moderate developments in Flanders. Another area of land market exchanges is that of biodiversity compensation for the industrial and harbour developments in Flanders. As rural land is cheaper and less affected by urban development, than the urbanised areas in Belgium, part of this takes place in the Netherlands, which is politically contested especially as it is often about of returning land to the sea (wetland development), which is at odds with regional identity of Zeeland having a long history of disastrous storm surges (Schuijers, 2012). Some of its islands have been lost to the sea and some have been reconquered again (De Kraker, 2006) and such a retreat seems an unhonourable defeat.

However, for farmers in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen the development of the land market is considered to be the largest threat they currently have to face (Spruijt and Schoorlemmer, 2015). The gap between lower land prices in the Dutch average has been closed (Spruijt and Schoorlemmer, 2015). Furthermore, the development that many non-farmers are 'hungry for land' result in taking land from agriculture and to put it in other uses (Spruijt and Schoorlemmer, 2015).

During the COVID19 crisis, the border became more real as the Belgian authorities physically blocked the borders, involving, e.g., that inhabitants of the village of Koewacht could not walk to the local bakery as it was located at the other site of the border (Maes, 2020); historical references were made to an earlier separation of the village by the 2000 Volt 'Wire of Death', which the Germans had installed at the same spot, and the rest of the border, during World War 1. The three mayors of the area have sent an open letter to their counterparts over the border to ask for understanding for the position relating to the interwovenness of the areas across the border (ZVB, 2020). It is not yet known what the effect of this renewed experience with a stringent border will have on the land market. Structurally the location close to the dense Flemish centres has not been changed. The first reports on the effects of COVID19 on the rural land market do not show a major shift (Essink, 2020).

In **Conclusion**, Rural close to the city regions with a relative to the rent low level of decoupled payments, may be prone to land take for both rural and other functions. The fact that cities are not too far away, makes that these other functions can play a large role on local land markets. Not always these other functions are high-priced, such as nature compensation, but political will can play also a role in allocation of land. In general, this type of regions has a very high share of farmland, which may make that this is not considered to be a big issue. Most of these regions have rather equal shares of farmland, but usually the price, in market value of the land, is high, which fits to the selection of this type as a low ratio of decoupled payments to rent.