

# Regional Cooperative of Westerkwartier



Cooperating for the benefit of the region  
and the people living and working there



## Next generation cooperative

The Regional Cooperative was founded in December of 2013 in the region of Westerkwartier (province of Groningen, Northern Netherlands). Its members are about 450 rural entrepreneurs, organised in diverse regional rural entrepreneurs' associations, regional schools and universities of applied sciences, and public bodies in the fields of health, well being, food and landscape.

The Regional Cooperative is a social enterprise. It is based on the main thoughts of the cooperative business model: plough profits back in the business and pay dividend to its members. However, there are five important differences as to the traditional understanding of the cooperative enterprise:

1. The Regional Cooperative has a **focus on the entire region and the regional economy**, instead of concentrating on one single industry. It develops and stimulates economic activities with a benefit for the region and the people who are living and working there.
2. Following from this, **the members are from many different sectors**, which makes it a so called multi-stakeholder alliance.
3. The members and stakeholders aim to **establish a learning and innovating regional community**. Cooperation between the various members and stakeholders is key, rather than competitiveness.
4. Thus, the Regional Cooperative of Westerkwartier **links diverse sectors and connects entrepreneurs, public bodies, educational institutions and civil society** together in the region. Collectively they deal with the challenges and prepare next generation business models based on circular economy, social inclusion and multi-stakeholders' engagement.
5. In addition, the Regional Cooperative **stimulates communication and education towards a change in attitude and behaviour**. It raises awareness of various target groups and supports public and private agencies and organisations, entrepreneurs, teachers and their students on how they can contribute to and profit from the cooperative economic development model.

The reason behind this is that there are lots of changes in our regions. Businesses are closing down, authorities are shrinking budgets, talented and well-educated young people are leaving rural areas; many of the over 50 are losing their jobs; social and social, cultural and health care facilities are being cut back – just to mention some of them.

It is impossible to try to turn the tide throughout an entire region by applying just one uniform policy. However, a new business and economic approach is key. The Regional Cooperative's focus is to adapt the proven cooperative model (an evidently successful business model as to employment and turnover) and prepare the next generation cooperative business models.

## What are the Regional Cooperative's objectives?

The Regional Cooperative aims to realise significant and sustainable regional social and economic development and progress. In particular, the focus is to:

- develop a usable next generation cooperative business model;
- build capacity to understand and implement the cooperative next business models by educating and training teachers, students, entrepreneurs, agencies, (local & regional), authorities and citizens;
- establish regional next generation cooperative businesses and start-ups;
- create expertise in governance, legislation and finance;





## Projects & research – in the region and on the job

In order to achieve these objectives, the Regional Cooperative demonstrates in practice how entrepreneurs, authorities, knowledge institutions and practitioners from a range of organisations can collectively learn, innovate and cooperate. They are cooperating within a working programme consisting of five interrelated sub programmes:

1. Landscape, agriculture & food
2. Energy, water & biobased economy
3. Public space, health & social well-being
4. Youth & start-ups
5. Next generation cooperative alliances

Within each sub programme projects are running. In the longer run, it is aimed to develop independent cooperatives within the sub programmes under the umbrella of the parent Regional Cooperative.



## Professorship

The Regional Cooperative has its own professorship at Hanze UAS in the city of Groningen. It is part of the Institute of Financial and Economic Management and connected to the Knowledge Centre Entrepreneurship at Hanze UAS. Professor Willem Foorthus since October 2015 is working on the subject of Sustainable Cooperative Entrepreneurship (SCE). He stimulates, conducts and practically applies research on business models based on regional assets, smart specialisation strategies and regional cooperative chains. He will empower and support new cooperative business models and develop an evidence based set of tools for sustainable entrepreneurial learning.

Key word for his action research are building new regional chains, develop new competences & skills and entrepreneurial learning & learn how to guide such innovation processes as a change agent.

“ Practical action research on cooperative entrepreneurship will deliver more and better understanding of building regional chains. And vice versa: the more we know about how to restore regional chains and establish new ones, the better we will get to the bottom of next generation business models. New and innovative regional cooperatives can only flourish within reliable chains with responsible partners and shareholders.

To achieve this, we need smart specialisations. After all, the best way to support each other is doing the same together, but each of us doing what s/he is best equipped and talented for. “



## FEM-Office & other start-ups

Connected to both Hanze UAS and the Regional Cooperative a group of young entrepreneurs has started their own business. The idea is to act as an innovative job agent for their fellow students towards entrepreneurs in the Regional Cooperative. They are not only guiding the negotiations towards a contract like job agencies normally do. They also observe the quality and results during the job, exchange experiences with the stakeholders involved and thus contribute to a new body of knowledge as to the cooperation between education institutions and the entrepreneurs in the field.

