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# ECONOMIC STRATEGY ALIGNMENT

The shift towards societal missions and goals in  
economic strategy from a business-perspective

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## Foreword

Before you lies the thesis *“Economic Strategy Alignment”*. This thesis investigates the alignment businesses experience with economic innovation strategies in the province of Noord-Brabant. This research is written in conjunction with the Master Economic Geography taught at the Radboud University in Nijmegen and the internship organization Brabantse Ontwikkelings Maatschappij (BOM). From June 2021 until January 2022, I was occupied with the development of this research and writing this thesis.

The main research question was developed with my internship supervisors, M. Huis in 't Veld and J. van der Horst – Rompa. Through desk research and qualitative methods, the answer to the main research question was formulated. During this research, my internship supervisors were always ready to answer questions and help during the challenges faced in the process. Furthermore, the guidance of Prof. Dr. A. Lagendijk, my thesis supervisor from Radboud University, was essential in creating this thesis.

The making of this thesis showed me how much one can learn through dialogue and the importance of societal missions in policy and mindset. Working on this thesis was not always smooth-sailing and had regular motivational struggles. This was perhaps due to the sub-optimal working conditions at home during the COVID-pandemic and should therefore have been at the office at the internship more often given the chance. That has caused this research to take significantly longer than previously expected. The guidance of my internship supervisors helped me in that respect to keep my motivation from falling into disarray.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all my supervisors for their support and guidance, especially in trying times, on route to this final part of my education. Another thank you to all the respondents who cooperated with me in this research and for gladly sharing their perspectives and insights regarding the subject. Without these people, this thesis would never be what it is today.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the BOM for taking me under their wing and facilitating this research during the difficult pandemic times. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends who stood by me and kept my spirits up to finish this thesis. And to them I would like to say; it is finally done, and with that also my years of being a student.

I hope you have much pleasure in reading.

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## Summary

Economic innovation policy has seen a shift from a top-sector-oriented focus to a mission-driven focus, the province of Noord-Brabant is no exception. This affects the businesses in the province and its regions. This shift in policy was made to adhere to global SDGs and help realize national societal goals. Because this affects businesses this research examines how the businesses in the province per region (still) identify themselves with this renewed policy.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate whether businesses experience alignment with the current economic innovation strategies. The following research question is posed in this research: *“To what extent do businesses in Noord-Brabant experience alignment with the regional economic innovation strategy that is shifting towards societal missions?”*. Regional economic innovation strategies are chosen here because of the four individual Triple-Helix regions investigated as part of the case study.

To provide an answer to the research question all relevant strategies are investigated and compared in addition to interviews being held with multiple different organizations and businesses, contributing to the data triangulation. Respondents from the four different regions in Noord-Brabant provided their insight regarding the matter. The main insights provided are that a shared *mindset* between businesses and mission-driven strategies proved a larger contributor for alignment between businesses and strategy regarding societal missions and transitions. Furthermore, in order to optimize this alignment, regional development agencies need to keep close to business context and support businesses to achieve profitable long-term businesses-cases and -models. Those two actions would help businesses with the shift and contribute further to societal missions and transitions as per mission-driven policy and economic strategy.

The alignment between businesses and economic strategy depends on social and economic motivations. The level of alignment differs from SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups, and larger companies and between the different regions. The shift towards societal missions and transitions is welcomed according to the respondents but achieving greater alignment and accelerating the shift requires still extensive work. By reaching out to businesses and finding the right people with the right mindset within those businesses that still have to gain from the strategies and the shift still much can be achieved.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the alignment between corporate agendas and provincial and regional economic strategy as economic strategy is shifting towards societal missions and transitional goals. These transitional goals are being operationalized in the province of Noord-Brabant by multiple agendas and the Economic Policy Framework 2030 of the province that aim to influence economic activity in the region.

Economic strategy has recently changed to also include pressing public issues towards a more mission-oriented strategy, a concept further explored by Rosado (2016). This is done with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in mind, to achieve more broad welfare and to realize national transitional goals (AWTI, 2021) which are also suggested by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate (Wiebes, 2019) and the European Committee's Green Deal (2019). But how does this differ from the previous top-sector approach for businesses and economic development? Do businesses (still) identify themselves with this new strategy and why do they or why do they not? What is the effect of this renewed economic strategy? And to what extent are businesses aware of the regional economic strategy? All questions that this thesis explores and delves deeper into.

One can say that this renewed economic strategy is focused to encompass more (societal) issues and therefore the businesses involved in this strategy are also drawn to these issues which is a good thing and ensures more mission-driven management of these businesses. But this research aims to examine that and takes the dialog with these businesses, get their view on this transition, and document the business-perspective to identify possible opportunities for closer alignment between economic strategies and corporate agendas.

The earlier economic strategies were developed around the competitive advantages of the region, also referred to as smart-specialization which is recommended to do policy-wise by Foray (2009) and Lagendijk (1999). An economic strategy helps build on these advantages and expand economic activities as the strategy helps businesses and institutions to focus on these advantages. This is particularly relevant in regions that have a Triple-Helix governance structure, which entails the representation of industry, knowledge institutions, and governments on its board. In these regions, alignment and collaboration are sought after by various actors in pursuing regional economic development. As the focus of the economic strategy may have become broader due to the increase of public issues added to the policy, such as mission-driven focus, the energy transition, the SDGs, and the national mission-driven innovation policy, the focus on economic development and the growth of businesses may be waning. These renewed strategies respond to economic opportunities the missions offer and therefore aim to increase the competitiveness of the region.

In general, the regional economic agenda is formulated in the interest of the region. Regional businesses and corporations may see this differently for themselves; this is further clarified in the next paragraph (1.1). The issue which needs to be investigated and researched is whether corporate agendas still can align with the altered economic strategy.

## 1.1 Issue and purpose

The issue or ‘wonder’ if you will of this research is to see from the perspective of businesses if economic strategy focusing on societal missions is in their best interest. In the province of Noord-Brabant, there is an organizational structure where both the province itself, the executive party of the province, the BOM, and four Triple-Helix regions each have their policy and agendas. A misfit between both the provincial and regional strategies/agendas and the perspective of businesses between these strategies and agendas can cause issues. For example, a lower degree of alignment can lead to promising cooperation projects failing to be achieved and associated societal missions and goals not being met. It can also lead to a loss of subsidies that can be granted to businesses when they embrace societal missions and goals, which leads to negative financial effects for businesses. While the economic strategy is transitioned into a mission-driven approach, this alteration may not work as effectively for the businesses as intended due to conflicting interests or lacking resources to comply with these transitions. This thesis will address those issues. These new strategies are implemented with the aim for businesses to uphold a more mission-driven business plan with societal missions and transitional goals in mind and to also impact aspects of human life (Rosado, 2016) concerning improving well-being and impacting the region economically. Whether or not this fits the affected businesses and corporations is something this thesis aims to investigate in multiple regions throughout the Noord-Brabant province.

The transition towards the mission-driven policy is a worldwide recurring and relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the workings, effects, and perspectives from actors have yet to be fully discovered and researched. In accordance with the cooperating internship organization Brabant Development Agency (BOM), the business perspective of this transition and the link with the provincial missions in the provincial strategy is a theme in which much insight still can be gained. The BOM is the executive agency of the province of Noord-Brabant that focuses on the economic development of the province. With the results of this research, this kind of policy, or more specifically the policy upheld in Noord-Brabant may be subject to change. That is if, from a business perspective, it turns out there is little heartiness for this kind of policy. Opportunities for further optimization and hindrances for businesses working with societal missions and transitions are explored and can be used in the future to work towards better alignment between economic strategy and businesses.

### 1.1.1 Research Questions

In order to conduct this research, the following research question is formulated. There is one main question that will be answered, and therefore several sub-questions will be explored.

Main research question

*“To what extent do businesses in Noord-Brabant experience alignment with the regional economic innovation strategy that is shifting towards societal missions?”*

Sub-questions:

- *“What does the regional economic development innovation strategy (in Noord-Brabant and its four Triple-Helix regions) that is currently focusing on societal missions look like, and to what extent is it different from previous strategies?”*
- *“How do businesses feel supported in these forms of economic strategy and to what extent are they aware of these different provincial and regional economic strategies?”*



- *“What do businesses think about the shift toward societal missions and transitional goals in economic strategies and do they think it is beneficial for them?”*
- *“How can the alignment between businesses in Noord-Brabant and regional economic innovation strategy be further optimized from a business-perspective?”*

The sub-questions mentioned above will contribute to the main research question which serves as the focus of this research. Each question, albeit sub-question or main question, will be answered with its own method which will be explained in chapter 3; *Methods*, of this thesis.

## 1.2 Relevance

This paragraph discusses the relevance (scientific and societal) along with the societal frontier on which this research takes place in.

### 1.2.1 Societal Frontier

The current economic strategy includes societal goals and ambitions and more public issues. These are supported and enabled by specialization and localization as by Ricardo (1976) and Gough (2014). With this in mind, the province of Noord-Brabant has developed the current economic strategy to keep advantages and achieve regional development throughout Noord-Brabant. The question that then arises is; do the businesses still identify themselves with this ‘new’ economic strategy or are their interests not represented like when the economic strategy was mostly sector-based what does this mean for the businesses in the region and therefore development in the region? So, this shift from a sector-based focus towards a broader mission-driven focus may have unforeseen consequences and may work out other than intended. There is also a possibility that because of this broader focus, certain profitable interests for businesses may be waning for they are supported to seek more sustainable ventures.

This research lends itself to investigating this shift and evaluating what this means for the goals, ambitions, and agendas of businesses in Noord-Brabant and Noord-Brabant on a provincial level. And can possibly answer the question of whether the economic strategy should be altered as it once was or if this broader scope works for multiple, public and private, parties.

#### - Scientific Relevance

Economic strategy is not a new concept and not new for regions to implement to support economic development and growth. But what is new is a more mission-driven strategy with a shifted focus on more public issues and to involve businesses and corporations in these issues. This is supported by the fact that multiple regions within the Netherlands implement these kinds of strategies, and all have different issues and views about the tension field they come with between corporations, public sectors, and policymakers. The research that will be conducted for this master thesis, therefore, tries to capture the views of the corporate sector and their take on an evaluation of this policy change. It can thereby contribute to mapping the effects, albeit positive or negative, that come with this transition. It also offers an opportunity to gaze into the future by exploring what these corporations and businesses potentially see in the mission-driven strategy. Their perspective can be used to evaluate current policy and potentially contribute to literature about these kinds of policies being

implemented concerning the effects of a broader strategy. It can also provide an improved framework for cooperation between policymakers and strategy developers and the corporations in question. This thesis additionally continues on the publication of the AWTI (Advisory Board of Science, Technology, and Innovation) *Samen de lat hoog leggen* (AWTI, 2021), this will be explored in *Societal Relevance*.

The motives for opting for a mission-driven or mission-oriented policy are clearly described by Mazzucato (2018) 1. Not picking winners but picking the willing 2. Not fixing the market, but actively co-shaping it 3. Instead of fearing failure welcome experimenting 4. Focus on quality of finance instead of quantity of finance 5. Improved engagement (in this case from businesses and corporations) 6. Sharing both risks and rewards with stakeholders. So, the evolution towards a mission-driven or oriented policy is clear and grounded but does it appeal to businesses and corporations who may find this policy not complying with their own agenda? Cipriani et al (2020) suggest that the current trend of profit-driven and mission-driven organizations by investigating both is that both business models take over aspects from each other to form a hybrid organization. Lane (2015) describes in this book *The Mission-Driven Venture* that mission-driven acting works empowering and describes the relationship with social entrepreneurs, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), partnering with other companies, and sustainability. He argues that mission-driven ventures lead by example and are a way to the future, an argument that is being tested in this thesis. In the debate article of Brown (2020) he critically reviews mission-driven policy implemented in the Scottish banking sector and fears that mission-driven policy may cause policy path dependency that could weaken innovation systems rather than improve them. He notes that innovation policies must be properly customized and tailored with demand conditions to be effective and he argues for context-led policy instead of mission-led. And this discussion may also be true from the perspective of businesses and corporations within the province of Noord-Brabant, and they, therefore, may not agree with this new policy or may not identify themselves with it. This thesis aims to explore this issue.

#### - **Societal Relevance**

As stated before, economic strategy is a tool in order to guide and enhance economic activity and growth within a region. In this case, in Noord-Brabant, this economic strategy has changed from a 'top-sector' strategy for businesses and corporations to also include societal missions and transitional goals. This strategy is therefore of more importance for society than it was before. The increased impact on social aspects of the region is a welcome one for the province of Noord-Brabant will benefit from a better economic climate and competitive position. A more sustainable, progressive, and societally connected region is advocated by Mazzucato (2018) to also be more attractive for the competitive position of regions. This is also emphasized in the e-zine developed by the BOM; *Barometer Brabantse Economie* (2020). In this publication, the pillars on which Brabant-wide development focuses are juxtaposed. These are; Economy, Society, and Environment with each their own indicators. In Noord-Brabant, one of the challenges to keep developing the province is focusing on well-being, *Brede Welvaart* in Dutch, which means that societal impact of businesses and corporations is increasingly important (RaboResearch, 2019). *Brede Welvaart* is of importance here for the current economic strategies in Noord-Brabant are also targeting society and aim to have a positive impact on well-being in the regions and the province. Even more important besides the pursuit of increasing well-being for all inhabitants are the transitional goals and societal missions described by the province of Noord-Brabant in the *Beleidskader Economie 2030* (Provincie Noord-Brabant, 2020). These goals and missions are heavily focused on the future development of the region;



to make its economy stronger, more sustainable, and more innovative. This builds upon the top-sector policy upheld in each individual region to build upon the already existing strengths of each region. This additionally continues on the publication of the AWTI (Advisory Board of Science, Technology, and Innovation) *Samen de lat hoog leggen* (AWTI, 2021). This organization provides independent recommendations for the government on those topics. In the mentioned publication they state that the story behind the societal transition is still unclear and that economic innovation goals may still be unclear for regions to focus on. More coordination on a mission-driven approach can provide much on a regional and national scale. Still much can be gained and this thesis hopes to contribute to that, at least in the bounds in where this research takes place.

This focus on the future and sustainability also affects inhabitants of the region in multiple ways but it contributes to regional development and increased economic activity. And this regional development and increased economic activity is always sought after for it creates an upward spiral of growth. The societal relevance of this research is therefore significant because it evaluates policy that influences both private and public sectors. And if this policy can be improved due to this research, the whole region can profit from this due to increased growth, increased wages, increased tax income, better infrastructure, amenities, and more jobs, which in turn causes more growth. This spiral effect also positively contributes to the societal mission described by the different provincial and regional economic innovation strategies.

In this research an evaluation is made on this shifted strategy by the businesses and corporations it at first was intended for and how they cope with this more mission-driven strategy and ambitions of the province. If found positive, this change may be a win-win situation for both public and private sectors within the region. In any case, this thesis can provide support for the BOM to improve strategy formulation according to business perspectives.

## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

In order to conduct this research and to provide answers and discussions regarding the research questions that are posed, multiple concepts will require further explaining and defining. While the focus of this research has already been explained, the following concepts are highlighted for their significance in this research.

*Mission-oriented strategy* or *mission-driven strategy* is central in this research as it is a relatively new form of policy. Rosado (2016) states that this form of strategy is concentrated on the creation of profit and producing an impact on different aspects of human life. For this research that entails the societal goals which are sought after by Noord-Brabant. According to Rosado, there is a widely spread shift in policy towards these kinds of strategies where societal goals or missions are core and these goals are hopefully achieved through governmental and corporate cooperation. Mazzucato (2018) as described earlier provides motives for this shift in policy. She clearly highlights the potential of these strategies in her work. However, Brown (2020) remains critical towards these policies for they can create path dependencies that are not centered around the competitive advantages of a region but instead requires a business to differentiate in aspects where their strengths do not lie. He, therefore, argues for context-led policy. In addition to mission-oriented strategy, this research also revolves around *transitional goals* that are focused on the future development of a region (AWTI, 2021). These goals are for example the clean energy transition, realizing a more inclusive economy, or complying with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One statement in the *Beleidskader Economie 2030* (Provincie Noord-Brabant, 2020) notes that economic success must trickle down to everyone in society which further links economic development and strategy to society. And it also suggests this trickling down must be achieved through governmental and corporate cooperation and alignment, which will be explained in the next paragraph. The different strategies under review in this research may have variations of these goals but each is shaped by these goals along with societal missions. Due to *smart-specialization* (Foray, 2009c) each region has its own individual strengths or weaknesses. In Noord-Brabant, Brainport has a strong technological sector whereas Agrifood Capital has a strong food-industry climate. These strengths and corresponding strategies of each region coincide with the top-sector policy to enhance these clusters of activities.

On the other side of the desired alignment as explained in the conceptual model (figure 1.) are businesses in the region, which whom the strategic alignment is sought after and whose alignment is also tested during interviews. Their alignment with the regional and/or provincial economic strategy is influenced by two different kinds of motivation: *Social Motivation* and *Economic Motivation*. Both kinds of motivation have their own sub-motivations which will be explained next.

### *Social Motivation*

Under the denominator Social Motivation this research poses trust/attitude/mindset towards the regional and/or provincial strategy, having a *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* policy or degree of awareness and *anchoring* in the region as aspects of social motivation.

Regarding trust and attitude towards policy depends for from person a person, and especially important is that of higher management of businesses who oversee business-activities and the

direction the business is heading in. This is further supported by Rangan et al. (2012) and their claim that higher management will cooperate with like-minded policies, in this case, regarding societal missions and transitional goals. Furthermore, Rangan et al. (2012) state that younger higher management often has a higher sense of societal issues and are therefore more progressive and open-minded than their older colleagues. This is also true for practicing Corporate Social Responsibility, which will be discussed next. If the general tone in higher management is not in line with regional or provincial economic strategy, there is little chance higher management still steers the business in the corresponding direction.

Rangan et al (2012) explain that every business should practice CSR with the aim to improve civil society and that it not only impacts society but also the image of a company. The latter will be delved deeper into at *Economic Motivation*. But Rangan and his colleagues (2012) note that besides having positive effects on a company's profitability, it also influences the societal environment around the company if it strives to contribute to society and contributes to societal challenges like the energy transition. This links it with the regional and provincial economic strategy which is also more focused on societal mission and goals. Therefore, practicing CSR adds to the alignment businesses can have with the regional and provincial economic strategies and this research poses that this relation is a positive correlation, for being more involved with society as a business will also improve your standing with the societal-focused economic strategy of the region and province. One side note is that this only works for integrated CSR and not ad hoc or solely internal CSR.

### *Economic Motivation*

Besides social motivation, there are also economic reasons for businesses to cooperate with regional and provincial economic strategies and experience alignment with the strategies. The motives provide economic benefits for businesses regarding *Incentives on return* such as subsidies, *Branding* with which businesses can position themselves as progressive to attract more business and *increased competitive position in the market* which can happen indirectly through branding but also directly through the mention in economic strategy for example.

Incentives on return in the context of an economic strategy are simply said, increased return through the high degree of alignment between businesses and economic strategy. In practice, this can mean that businesses are eligible for subsidies because of their societal focus or activities. This directly influences their profitability of course and is, therefore, a reason for businesses to seek this alignment. A prime example of this is described by Noordover & Drahmman (2018) in the form of *Stimulering Duurzame Energie (SDE)-subsidies*. This is a subsidy that businesses can apply for if they produce any form of sustainable energy like biomass energy, solar energy, etc., and is handed out by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate (EZK). This is just one example of multiple, but it makes the point clear of deploying an economic strategy for profitability for it steers businesses to contribute to the energy-transition as per earlier described transitional goal.

Businesses can use branding as a means to increase their public image. This can positively influence shareholder value because of increased business activities as a result of a good public image and reputation. According to Alves (2009) even in 2009, more than 75 percent of S&P 500 companies had a dedicated section on their website denoting their environmental and societal

policies. This is a testament to using societal issues and policy to brand the business in being responsible. At the same time, this poses a dilemma, for this tool can also be used to *greenwash* business activities. Delman & Burbano (2011) pose that while companies publicly advocate their activities on being responsible this could be misleading towards costumers regarding environmental performance and environmental or social benefits of a certain product or service. This false advertising has adverted effects on consumer confidence and therefore profitability in an indirect sense in contrast to 'incentives on return' as discussed above.

Another aspect of economic motivation for businesses to seek strategic alignment is an increase in their competitive position in the market. While the above-mentioned aspects indirectly do the same it is perhaps the most sought-after strive of businesses everywhere for if one's competitive position improves, so do your profits and your publicity. And while regional and provincial economic strategies include more societal issues and challenges, it is still a strategy focused on economic growth, also for the businesses in the region and province. Businesses naturally enjoy growth as its purpose and with economic strategy, their growth is enhanced and with that, perhaps also even their market share in their respective field of activity. And an increase in market share comes with different advantages as juxtaposed by Smith & Basu (2002) and those are to name a few; long-term financial strength, lower costs, more opportunities for brand expansion, and higher perceived product quality.

## 2.1 Conceptual Model

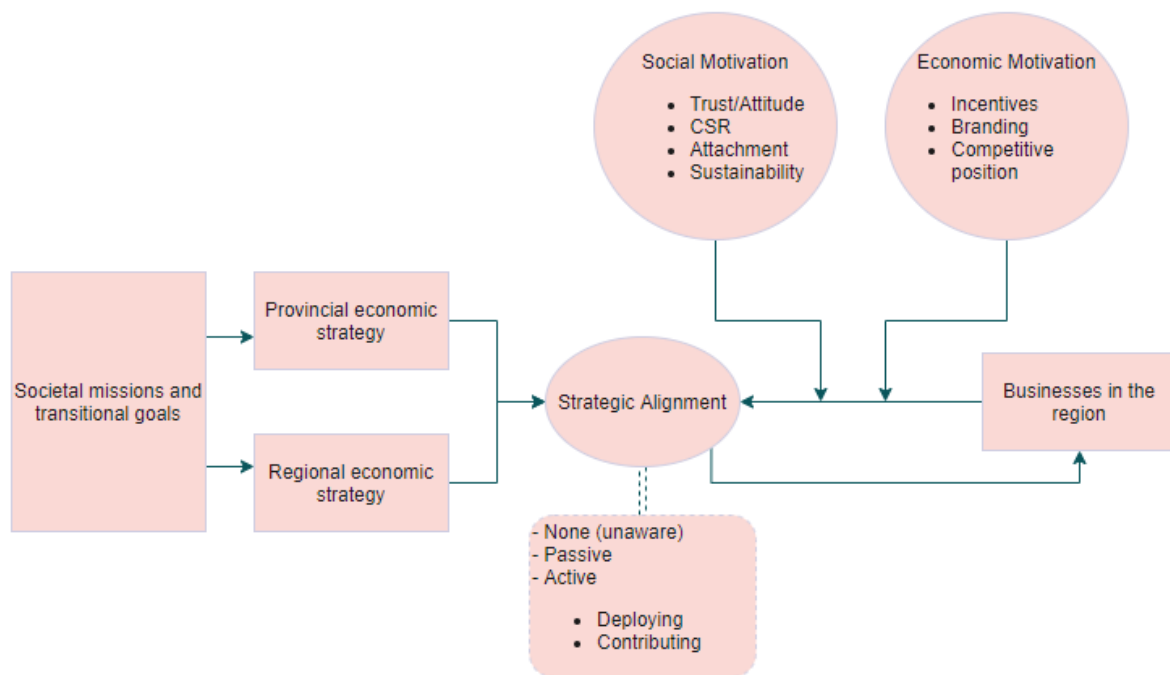


Figure 1. Conceptual model of research

In the figure above (1.) there is a schematic overview of the research with the concepts used with *Strategic Alignment* in the center. On the left-hand side, there are the *Societal missions and transitional goals*, resulting from the national mission-driven innovation policy, that influence both the *provincial and regional economic strategies*. On the right-hand side, there are *businesses in the region* whose strategic alignment is explored in this research. The alignment is influenced by *Social Motivation*, which consists of Trust/Attitude/Mindset of higher management, CSR and Anchoring, and *Economic Motivation* which consists of Incentives regarding return, Branding, and Competitive position.

*Strategic Alignment*, as can be seen above, comes from two factors. *Provincial economic strategy* and *Regional economic strategy* on one hand and *Businesses in the region* on the other hand. The aspiration here is that *Businesses in the region* and both *economic strategies* move towards *Strategic Alignment* in which both sides come into synchronization with each other's goals and ambitions. However, in order for *Businesses in the region* to seek this alignment with the economic strategies they are influenced by a set of two main factors: *Social Motivation* and *Economic Motivation*. As mentioned before these consist of multiple sub-factors detailed in the model (figure 1). In other words, the coding of the conceptual model can be divided into halves, the left-side where policy is developed and the right-side where businesses are aimed to be drawn into this policy in order to seek alignment in the center. This thesis zooms in chapter 4 into the left policy-side and in chapter 5 and chapter 6 into the right-side, the perspectives of businesses regarding alignment. *Strategic Alignment* can furthermore be expressed in multiple degrees or levels; *None* (business is unaware of the economic strategy), *Passive* (business is aware), and *Active* (business is deploying the strategy or business is contributing to strategy by having a voice in the matter for example). Due to the iterative

nature of this research, some connection between *Social Motivation* and *Economic Motivation* was identified and deducted from the interviews and will be discussed in the *Conclusion*.



## Chapter 3. Methods

This master thesis looks at the shift in regional/provincial economic strategy towards a mission-oriented strategy from a business-perspective. In order to conduct this research, an analysis was required of the current economic strategy and was compared to other regions within Noord-Brabant and the provincial goals and ambitions. This step in this research required intensive desk-research, as detailed by Verschuren & Doorewaard (2010), and has formed the base of the interview guide needed to conduct interviews in the next step. After this policy-review, to get a clear picture of the perspective of businesses in the region, in-depth interviews were conducted. This was done with experts on different regions and experts between regions with knowledge of businesses in their respective regions on this new kind of strategy and what that entails of businesses. This method was chosen because of the sharing of insights of respondents and to make underlying arguments and motives clear to the researcher. These respondents have originally come from the network of the BOM and with the so-called 'Snowball-method' (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010) they were asked if they can present further relevant respondents. Each investigated region must be well represented in terms of the number of respondents to be able to make clear conclusions and statements to be generalizable. After the interviews were held, with an interview guide which was sent before each interview, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed through *triangulation of sources* for the respondents came from different backgrounds to give their insights regarding the topic. This triangulation provides a *holistic* nature where every aspect is interconnected, as suggested by the conceptual model (figure 1). This method of triangulation is widely used for qualitative research in order to construct a network of perspectives used by the respondents during the interviews and get results from those interviews which may have been conscious or unconsciously discussed. This thesis, therefore, conducts *triangulation of methods* due to the use of desk-research and interviews and *triangulation of sources* due to the different backgrounds of the respondents, key characteristics of a case study (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). After these results are presented in this thesis, conclusions were made, the main research question was answered in accordance with the results and these conclusions are discussed at the end of this research.

The reliability of this research is reasonable due to the fact that regional economic strategy and corporate agendas do not change often but will gradually shift. In-depth interviews however are subject to lower reliability because of the use of respondents and their perspectives and insights as data. Conducting the exact same interview with exactly the same respondents and expecting the exact same results is near impossible at a later moment in time but this is always the case with qualitative research. There is also a certain degree of subjectivity present due to the method of interviews because respondents are asked to share their thoughts, which are always subjective but can reveal underlying tensions and opinions which may otherwise not be discovered. There is also the possibility that respondents provide socially desirable given the cooperation with the executive party of the province (BOM) and the corresponding authority (PNB). There was however no indication of this in the held interviews, which were all open and where the respondents openly discussed their points of view. The question about the respondents' opinion about the BOM, which was because the iterative nature of this research added in at a later stage, also did not show signs of desirable answers since the answers provided still contained feedback and personal opinions.

To accomplish the above-mentioned steps a fair amount of preliminary work was needed. Firstly, a review of different policy documents was required. That compromised the economic strategy of all investigated regions and that of the BOM, the provincial goals and ambitions, and the familiarization of each region. Based on that desk-research and additional scientific and grey literature, which is composed of news articles, magazine articles, relevant tv-shows, and columns by experts, the interview guide was made. This interview guide will differ slightly for each region because each region has its own economy and respective strategy on a regional level.

Each sub-question posed in chapter 1 has its own method on how it is to be answered. These will briefly be discussed now. All these sub-questions together will form the answer to the main question posed in chapter 1.

*“What does the regional economic development innovation strategy (in Noord-Brabant and its four Triple-Helix regions) that is currently focusing on societal missions look like, and to what extent is it different from previous strategies?”*

This sub-question was answered through the means of desk-research in the first part of the execution stage of this thesis. It offers insights into all the strategies and provided the base on which an encompassing interview guide was to be formulated for the next stage of the thesis and has provided a framework for the next sub-questions to be answered.

*“How do businesses feel supported in these forms of economic strategy and to what extent are they aware of these different provincial and regional economic strategies?”*

After the first sub-question is answered and an interview guide is formulated, interviews with relevant respondents were held and during those interviews, the sub-question above was answered in accordance with insights provided by the respondents. There is a certain degree of subjectivity present in the question and answers may vary between respondents, but that fact contributes to the making of a complete impression for the entire region in which the research is taking place.

*“What do businesses think about the shift toward societal missions and transitional goals in economic strategies and do they think it is beneficial for them?”*

The above-mentioned sub-question is of the same nature as the previous sub-question with the goal to be answered by multiple respondents with a degree of subjectivity. Experts who are in contact with multiple businesses, but also individual businesses can provide answers and insights for this sub-question.

*“How can the alignment between businesses in Noord-Brabant and regional economic innovation strategy be further optimized from a business-perspective?”*

As with the two previous sub-questions, this sub-question was answered by relevant respondents during interviews. This question also related heavily to the internship organization, BOM, for it offered

the organization insights to improve or alter policy and seek further opportunities to cooperate with businesses in Noord-Brabant to further enhance its economy, competitive position and contribute to societal missions and transitional goals.

### 3.1 Hypothesis and preliminary expectations

To come to a clear hypothesis, one must reflect on the main question to be answered in this research which was as follows:

*“To what extent do businesses in Noord-Brabant experience alignment with the regional economic innovation strategy that is shifting towards societal missions?”*

This question can lead to a spectrum of answers ranging from ‘no experienced alignment’ to ‘complete experienced alignment’. However, because this research involves an examination of different regions each of these regions can lead to different results. Furthermore, there can be differences in aspects in the economic strategy with which there is a higher degree or lower degree of experienced alignment. Numerous variables can lead to a wide variety of results and conclusions in this research. But because of this variety, specific recommendations can be made after the conclusion of the research. With these recommendations, the cooperating internship organization, BOM, can deduct proper interventions which can lead to more opportunities to strengthen regions and therefore the entire province of Noord-Brabant. With the identification of ‘misfits’ or a low degree of alignment, there are also chances for improvements.

### 3.2 Case / Data Description

For this research, multiple cases will be selected and investigated further. These cases, as discussed earlier are formulated by the BOM and are West-Brabant (REWIN), Midden-Brabant (Midpoint Brabant), Noordoost-Brabant (Agrifood Capital), Zuidoost-Brabant (Brainport Development) and Noord-Brabant-wide (Province and BOM). The reason for these cases to be chosen is due to the fact that they make up the four regions in the province of Noord-Brabant which are served by individual Triple-Helix organizations and complemented by the province-wide organization of the Province of Noord-Brabant (PNB) and the BOM. The regions and province all have their own identity and specializations and therefore require their own approach by their respective organization. Furthermore, they each may have their own struggles and issues with the transition towards a more mission-driven economic strategy and ambitions of the Noord-Brabant province. The data which shall be used in this research composes of policy-review data and interview data where the latter is further examined using data-triangulation as mentioned earlier in this chapter. This data is then used to create a network from which results can be extracted and investigated in a qualitative manner.

### 3.3 Data-Analysis

The data-analysis in this research relies on two types of data. The first is form is data is through so-called *secondary research* (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010) and interprets materials produced by other parties. In this research that entails an overview of all the different economic innovation

strategies of chapter 4. The second form of data is *qualitative* data from held interviews with respondents. The used interview-guide and the accompanying transcriptions can be found in the Appendices. This data is used and discussed in Chapters 5 & 6.

All the *secondary research* data is used in a qualitative way in order to realize a summary for the reader. While the results of this data are still interpretations, all the used documents are public domain and analyzed in a subjective, descriptive manner.

The qualitative interview data is analyzed through the method of data-triangulation as mentioned before. This data provides the base of this research, and the perspective and insights of these respondents are used to answer most of the research questions and to form the base of the final conclusions and recommendations.

### 3.4 Validity and reliability

Because this research utilizes primarily qualitative data the results are hard to replicate. The investigated documents in chapter 4, the secondary research data, are strategies that are used for a limited number of years. But they are still public documents that can always be found and analyzed again in a subjective manner. The internal and external validity and reliability of this data is therefore significant, while still being qualitative data sources.

The data gathered from the interviews have higher reliability. Perspectives, insights, and opinions of people tend to change and are not set in stone. Therefore, while re-creating this research, one may find that the respondents have different data to provide in another moment in time for their perspectives, insights, and/or opinions to have changed. Regarding validity the qualitative data from the interviews have a significant internal validity for the transcriptions can be found in the Appendices and those results are subjectively interpreted. However, the external validity is also questionable. The scope of this research is focused on one province and a limited number of respondents regarding the subject was interviewed. Therefore, the results of this research tend to not be generalizable because of the limited scope and the fixed case investigated. However, due to triangulation, when respondents share the same perspectives and insights that provide an indication of generalizable results for they are confirmed by respondents with different backgrounds.

## Chapter 4. Economic Innovation Strategies in Noord-Brabant

This first results chapter delves into the different economic strategies and agendas in the province of Noord-Brabant. The policies, drafted by either the province, BOM itself, or individual regions, are reviewed, analyzed, and differentiated from each other. This is then translated into the overview tables further in this chapter. After this overview, a more detailed discussion of the differences and similarities between the different economic strategies follows. The chapter ends with the formulation of an answer for the sub-question; *“What does the regional economic development innovation strategy (in Noord-Brabant and its four Triple-Helix regions) that is currently focusing on societal missions look like?”*.

### 4.1 The different regional and provincial economic innovation strategies in Noord-Brabant

In the following table (1) one can find an overview of the economic strategies in Brabant. Not only the provincial *Beleidskader Economie 2030* is found here but also the economic strategies of each region; AgriFood Capital, REWIN, Midpoint Brabant, Brainport Eindhoven, and finally the multi-year plan of the Brabantse Ontwikkelings Maatschappij (BOM) which is the executive organization on behalf of the province of Noord-Brabant. In table 1 there are multiple aspects of each strategy disclosed. As some strategies may be too large and complex this table can be seen as a summary of certain aspects.

The aspects reviewed are 1. *Organization* of the corresponding strategy, which means who formulated it. 2. *Background of composer* entails how the governance is constructed; is it a pure governmental organization or a Triple-Helix organization (which consists of government, businesses, and knowledge institutions), etc. 3. *Vision/Ambition of strategy* entails what the strategy aims to do. 4. *Mission of strategy* details what the strategy stands for in terms of values and principles. 5. *Duration of strategy* is quite simply in what timespan exists the strategy. 6. *Areas of focus* is in short, the area on which the strategy in that region focuses and are therefore its strengths. 7. *Activities of composer*, are what role and activities there are described in the corresponding strategy. And finally, 8. *Tools & Services*, this part of the table highlights what the strategy concretely offers businesses with this document.

These aspects are chosen because they can provide a quick insight into each strategy and can also provide quick insight into their differences on core elements. In paragraph 4.2 the differences and similarities of these aspects are explored in more detail. For a more detailed review of these strategies, one can always find them as they are public domain once they are released.

	<i>Province of Noord-Brabant</i>	<i>AgriFood Capital</i>	<i>REWIN</i>
<b>Organization</b>	Province of Noord-Brabant	Stichting AgriFood Capital	Economic Board West-Brabant
<b>Background of composer</b>	Provincial government	Triple Helix-organisation	Governmental-, educational institutions, and businesses in the region with Triple-Helix
<b>Vision/Ambition of Strategy</b>	<p>In 2030 an international competing, sustainable and innovative economy.</p> <p>Realizing a regional economy that can fluctuate with societal needs and preferences of consumers.</p> <p>An agile economy that can take in business cycles and quickly apply technological developments.</p> <p>An internationally competing and innovative economy that contributes to SDG's</p> <p>Three concrete goals set out for 2030:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Brabant is a leading player in the European innovation system</li> <li>2. Brabant has an internationally excellent competitive position</li> <li>3. In Brabant's society everyone profits from economic success</li> </ol>	<p>Foodsystems in the future are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Precise:</b> Production is optimized</li> <li>- <b>Circular:</b> Production cycles are closed to reduce waste of resources</li> <li>- <b>Valuable:</b> Creating as much added value as possible, both economic and societal</li> <li>- <b>Connected:</b> Consumer and producer are more connected</li> </ul> <p>Contributing to the SDG's "No more hunger", "Responsible Consumption" and "Innovation".</p> <p>Developing the ecosystem by the means of 5 tasks with concrete bullet-points for Stichting AgriFood Capital:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Human Capital</li> <li>- Entrepreneurship</li> <li>- Knowledge &amp; Innovation</li> <li>- Networks &amp; Clusters</li> <li>- Communication &amp; Clusters</li> </ul>	<p>Profit from our central location and develop our relations outside of our regional borders.</p> <p>Contribute to 'sustainable production and consumption'.</p> <p>Not working with a top-down strategy but being inspired by the sectors who each make their own program and ambition where the three theme's Connection, Becoming Smarter and Being more Sustainable are still central.</p> <p>Development focused on sustainability and 'smartness'. Creation of 'mass' by seeking and sustaining alliances.</p> <p>Attracting and keeping talented workforce with knowledge-infrastructure</p> <p>Helping SMEs and Start-Ups</p>
<b>Mission of Strategy</b>	<p>Brabant aims to have a sustainable and prospering economy. And being able to quickly respond to new innovations and developments.</p> <p>Framework for action on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mission-driven Innovation Policy</li> <li>- Talent-development</li> <li>- Europe and internationalisation</li> <li>- Spatial Economic structure</li> <li>- Other provincial programs</li> </ul> <p>Communication and public affairs</p>	Developing an excellent ecosystem by connecting businesses, knowledge institutions, and governments with societal organizations in the region.	<i>"We need to connect, we are going to be smarter, and we need to be more sustainable."</i>
<b>Duration of Strategy</b>	2020-2030	May 2020-2030	Undisclosed
<b>Areas of Focus</b>	Innovative Strength Cooperative Strength Agglomerative Strength	AgriFood with crossovers on High-Tech Systems and Materials (HTSM), logistics, Lifesciences, and digitalization	Hightech Maintenance, Logistics, Agrofood & Biobased and Creative Sciences
<b>Activities of Composer</b>	<p>Investing and stimulating impactful ventures</p> <p>Three roles; Setting direction, stimulate movement towards challenges, and enable development</p>	<p>Stimulating and maintaining networks, clusters projects, and programs.</p> <p>Developing and monitoring the regional economic strategy.</p>	Creating a hub for innovative entrepreneurship.
<b>Tools &amp; Services</b>	Purchase- and innovation-budgets for making meaningful investments.	Offering a trajectory, not a blueprint towards 2030. The agenda is an invitation and call-to-action for the future of our food.	A program-oriented agenda set out by the REWIN Triple-Helix organization to help guide businesses.

Table 1: Overview of the different economic strategies in Noord-Brabant including BOM's Multi-Year Plan.



	<i>Midpoint Brabant</i>	<i>Brainport Eindhoven</i>	<i>BOM</i>
<b>Organisation</b>	Stichting Midpoint Brabant	Stichting Brainport	Brabant Development Agency
<b>Background of composer</b>	Cooperation of multiple municipalities and Triple Helix	Triple Helix-organisation	Executive agency of the province, with the province and ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate as main shareholders
<b>Vision/Ambition of Strategy</b>	<p>Three starting points for the direction of this strategy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work towards a smart society with societal and ecological added value</li> <li>- Work towards a smart economy with high return</li> <li>- Doing this from knowledge, skill, and character</li> </ul> <p>Combining economical, ecological, and social growth</p> <p>Making essential steps towards a climate-adaptive, circular, and energy-neutral society</p> <p>Making the step from Triple-Helix to 'Multi-Helix' which includes society</p> <p>The region becoming a powerful, cooperative partner for adjacent regions; West-Brabant, Brainport, and AgriFood Capital</p>	<p>Ten challenges divided between three themes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developing key-technologies</li> <li>- New technology-market combinations for societal challenges</li> <li>- Supporting SMEs, Start-ups and Scale-ups</li> <li>- Gaining capital for growth</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>2. Talent: The fuel for our technological engine</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All students in Brainport receive innovative education</li> <li>- Everyone in the region is involved with Live Long Development</li> <li>- Job-market in balance; the right people in the right place</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>3. Living- and business-climate: The region as good living and workplace for everyone</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investing in collective amenities and accessibility</li> <li>- The Triple-Helix as helping engine for welfare (<i>Brede Welvaart</i>)</li> </ul> </li> </ol> <p>Instruments to support public-private ecosystems</p>	<p>BOM-missions → in year plans translated to programs, projects, and services.</p> <p>The realization of missions and challenges through innovative entrepreneurship</p> <p>Focus on 4 societal challenges and underlying transitions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Energy &amp; Sustainability:</b> The realization of the energy-transition en contribute to the transition of a climate-proof and sustainable economy and society</li> <li><b>2. Agriculture, Nature &amp; Food:</b> The realization of the transition towards a sustainable, fair, and safe system for food production and consumption</li> <li><b>3. Health &amp; Care:</b> The realization of a society where people can vitally age while maintaining effective and affordable healthcare</li> </ol> <p><b>Sustainable &amp; Competitive Economy:</b> Perpetuating Brabant as top knowledge- and innovation-region of Europe by staking on digitalization and circularity of Brabant's key technologies.</p>
<b>Mission of Strategy</b>	Being the region in the Netherlands where sustainable development in policy and execution comes to fruition.	<p><i>"Sustaining and strengthening of Brainport's position as top-technology-region."</i></p> <p>Through strategy and projects integrally respond to economic challenges on talent, knowledge, entrepreneurship, business-climate, and societal challenges.</p>	<p><i>"SDG's as directional framework"</i></p> <p>Together with entrepreneurs, knowledge institutions, and public parties tackling projects and initiatives that contribute to the creation of new sustainable revenue models and the strengthening of the Brabant innovation ecosystem.</p>
<b>Duration of Strategy</b>	2019-2023	2020-2025	2021-2024
<b>Areas of Focus</b>	Smart Services, Smart Industry, Smart Logistics, and Smart Leisure	Social challenges on energy, health, nutrition, mobility, and the strength of HTSM in those areas	'Ecosystem-approach' where there is also focus on the environments of entrepreneurs
<b>Activities of composer</b>	Investing in innovative and sustainable society and economy	Regional strategic focus and integral consideration of the interests of governments, educational- and knowledge institutions, and businesses in the knowledge-intensive manufacturing industry.	<p><b>Developing:</b> Stimulating innovation in SME's</p> <p><b>Investing:</b> Availability of knowledge- and risk-capital for start- and scale-ups</p> <p><b>Internationalization:</b> Attracting and supporting foreign innovative businesses and helping local entrepreneurs in foreign markets.</p>
<b>Tools &amp; Services</b>	<p>Detailed programs on which the region would like to focus on in the coming years in terms of investments and activities.</p> <p>A call to action for businesses to also invest into (co)finance of these projects to better realize set goals</p>	<p>Brainport Development (BD) as economic development-agency of Brainport.</p> <p>BD as project manager and connector of different involved parties. Sustaining the ecosystem through for example: supporting SMEs with their business plans, strategic exploration, and maintaining contacts with stakeholders.</p>	<p>Organizing and coordinating capability for cooperation</p> <p>Strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems through the developing of strategic agendas and setting up and executing projects</p> <p>Large array of funds and grants for developing innovative SME's</p>

## 4.2 Differences and similarities between the different strategies

This paragraph discusses the points listed in the table above.

### *Background of composer*

As can be seen in table 1 each region has its own governance that has composed the according strategy for that region. These regional governance can also be different in their composition. For example, while most governance are Triple-Helix organizations consisting of knowledge institutions, government, and businesses, Midpoint Brabant is also a collaboration of multiple municipalities within in the Triple Helix region, and the regions have a board with their own composition. The composition of the Triple-Helix and region can therefore differ. The province itself is on a higher degree of policy entirely, with the BOM as its executive agency. So, while the four regions have differently structured governances, the geographical scale of policy is equal for each of their respective regions, with the exception of the province and the BOM. This difference in composition and scale plays a role in the upcoming points.

### *Vision/Ambition of Strategy*

As mentioned earlier sustainable development and innovation are significant parts of all strategies. As explained in paragraph 4.1 this point refers to what the strategy aims to achieve, with regard to the strengths in each region. It can clearly be seen that the societal missions and challenges are being contributed to even though some are more explicit in this than others, for example when referring to SDGs. The province and the BOM aim to address chosen SDGs and challenges throughout the entire province while the individual regions aim to contribute to what SDGs they can with their individual strengths and top sectors per region. Furthermore, on the agenda of each strategy, there is a notable mention of increased support for SMEs, start-ups, and scale-ups and cooperation on different scales. This support generally entails supporting impactful and sustainable businesses with a healthy long-term business plan that also contributes to societal challenges and transitions. Cooperation on different scales such as bottom-up with society and end-users, but also inter-regional is also to achieve more support and strength to contribute to these challenges and transitions. All strategies are explicit in their corresponding ambitions and what they aim to do.

### *Mission of Strategy*

In terms of values and principles, the different strategies may be formulated in various ways, but one key term is frequent here: operating sustainably. So that makes the shift towards societal missions and challenges exceedingly clear. Still, in keeping with individual strengths, themes like digitalization and smart technology are touched upon in all strategies. Individually the mission of the strategy can differ from each other as can be seen. Brainport Development and Midpoint Brabant have a clear target that is explicit in its formulation and can be measured while AgriFood Capital states to develop an excellent ecosystem and REWIN aims to be more connected, smarter, and sustainable with no hard measure point. The main difference regarding this aspect of the strategy lies in the concreteness of the mission.

### *Duration of Strategy*

Every strategy has its own duration. But one striking fact here is that arguably in the smallest regions, AgriFood Capital and REWIN have the longest duration of strategy, ten years (AgriFood), and undisclosed (REWIN) duration in their respective strategy. Another interesting fact is while each strategy strongly argues for cooperation and collaboration between regions because of their own specializations, the duration of strategy does not overlap. There may be an opportunity for increased coherence if all strategies have the same duration which means that all regions have their perspective focused on the next x number of years to better coincide with one another. That may testify to increased collaboration. This opportunity will be discussed later in the research in the *Recommendations* chapter. Additionally, the difference in duration can indicate that some strategies already had to deal with COVID-19 at the time of development, while others had not and therefore could not foresee this and its consequences.

### *Areas of Focus*

This point represents the ‘top-sectors’ of each region and selected challenges as explained by each according strategy and on what sectors or developments they would like to focus on with the strategy. One notable difference here is that the BOM, not being geographically bound to one region in the province and operating in the entire province, focuses more on a so-called ‘ecosystem-approach’. Rather than focusing on one or multiple sectors like the other governance, with the exception of Brainport Eindhoven who shares this approach, in which there is also a focus on the environment of entrepreneurs, which focuses on societal transitions. The BOM’s focus is not as concrete as to be able to direct focus on sectors but building on strengths of the entire province through the four themes the BOM details. Furthermore, in this point, the focus on a sustainable future is hinted at in all strategies with some variations regards individual strength, such as smart systems as development but in food or logistics for different regions. In the next points, this will be more apparent, but the focus of most strategies (with the exception of REWIN) is with the societal challenges in mind. One notable fact here is that REWIN has a more specific focus on sectors, coinciding with top-sector policy. And Midpoint Brabant also is not explicit on what societal mission they focus on.

### *Activities of Composer*

For this aspect, each strategy is consulted to identify what the organization actually does. There are many similarities as each organization contributes to enabling development by maintaining networks of stakeholders, setting out regional economic development programs, and stimulating impactful ventures. These activities are formulated in the strategies but some strategies like those of Brainport Eindhoven and Midpoint Brabant also state their budget for certain activities like available funds. This makes the strategy more concrete and provides a clear insight for interested parties like businesses in the respective region. Furthermore, the mention of cooperating on different scales, from locally to internationally, with stakeholders and society is a common theme in all strategies although this aspect is more detailed in the strategies of Brainport Eindhoven and Midpoint Brabant. This coincides with the length and detail of their strategies as opposed to AgriFood Capital’s and REWIN’s. This is interesting as REWIN is connected closely with prominent businesses in the region and is still focused on their top-sectors. The BOM is more explicit in two additional activities: internationalization and investing with own investment capital. This entails the attraction and supporting of foreign innovative businesses in Noord-Brabant and helping local entrepreneurs in their venture towards

foreign markets. This international aspect is also prominent in the Brainport Eindhoven strategy. Their focus is on both businesses as well as attracting ex-pats to the region to expand their strength of a large foreign workforce.

### *Tools & Services*

At this point in the table, the concrete tools and services that the strategy provides are summarized. The main tools and services provided by the strategies are budgets for investments (in the strategies of Brainport Eindhoven and Midpoint Brabant there are detailed strives regarding investments) and program-oriented trajectories for the duration of the strategy and sometimes beyond to help and guide existing and new businesses. Some strategies are also a call to action like those of AgriFood Capital and Midpoint Brabant to invest to better achieve goals and raise awareness of the future of food production for example. Therefore, these strategies also have a political load. Which may influence the awareness of societal missions. Organizations also explain their current and potential role as project-manager of meaningful projects and connectors of stakeholders. So, the tools and services the strategies can provide are cooperation with and between businesses and other parties, networking to link businesses with each other, and matchmaking with which they aim to create new opportunities for businesses. These tools and services also come forward in the interviews held and which are discussed in the next chapters. There, and in the transcriptions (Appendix II), the impact of these tools and services will become more apparent. The tools and services are what the businesses concretely experience of the strategy first-hand and are therefore of importance to how businesses experience alignment with the economic strategies.

To conclude this chapter the sub-question posed at the beginning of this chapter is raised once again: “*What does the regional economic development innovation strategy (in Noord-Brabant and its four Triple-Helix regions) that is currently focusing on societal missions look like?*”. This chapter has given an insight into all the six different economic innovation strategies currently active in the province of Noord-Brabant. The focus on societal missions, challenges, and transitions are apparent in all strategies. However, it’s not as explicit in all strategies. The activities of the BOM are clearly different from the Triple-Helix organizations for their inclusion of investment capital and internationalization. Another striking fact is AgriFood Capital’s and Midpoint Brabant’s direct call to action. This highlights the importance of the shift towards societal missions and challenges and tackling the SDGs. And this all the while having slightly different structures of Triple-Helix governance. One opportunity here to achieve better alignment between the strategies could be their duration as mentioned before.

Current strategies are more heavily focused on societal missions and transitions than their predecessors. In the last *BOM Multi-Year Plan (2017-2020)* and provincial *Beleidskader*, these aspects were less prominent and the main focus was the development of the region’s top sectors. This is also supported by the respondent at the province of Noord-Brabant (Personal Communication, 24-9-2021). Who stated that the previous iteration of the *Beleidskader* mentioned societal missions and transitions but top sectors were the main theme and the current *Beleidskader* seeks more connection between top sectors and societal missions and transitions. Therefore, the shift towards more prominent societal missions and transitions is evident, with the exception of REWIN’s strategy, which currently still clings to top-sectors. One final disclaimer here is that REWIN is currently in the process of forming its new economic strategy as disclosed by the respondent during the interview with REWIN.

In the next chapter the business’s perspective on these strategies, their focus, and this aforementioned shift towards mission-driven strategy is further explored.

## Chapter 5. Business-perspective on the economic strategies of Noord-Brabant

This chapter explores the perspective of businesses on the economic strategies in Noord-Brabant. Therefore, this chapter aims to answer two of the sub-questions posed in the first chapter of this research which are: *“How do businesses feel supported in these forms of economic strategy and to what extent are they aware of these different provincial and regional economic strategies?”* and *“What do businesses think about the shift towards societal missions and transitional goals in economic strategies and do they think it is beneficial for them?”*. To achieve adequate answers for these questions several businesses throughout Noord-Brabant were interviewed, both growing businesses and established businesses, regional development agencies, and cluster-organisations with the help of the *Interview guide* which can be found in Appendix I. Because of the differentiation of respondents and the limited number of businesses interviewed, their perspective is generalized through the means of the before-mentioned triangulation and organizations that work closely with a large number of businesses. The references to the corresponding interviews are indicated with firstly the interview-number followed by the paragraph-number in that interview.

### 5.1 The awareness within businesses and the feeling of support

#### 5.1.1. Awareness

This sub-paragraph shares the perspectives of the respondents regarding the awareness of businesses on the different strategies in Noord-Brabant and the most interesting statements are delved deeper into. This paragraph has the following layout; firstly, the regional scale is explored, then the provincial scale, and lastly an answer regarding the sub-question is formed.

In the regional context across the four regions, there is a definite distinguishment between Brainport Eindhoven and the other regions. The awareness in the Eindhoven region is more present according to all the regional respondents<sup>2,5;3,43</sup>. Because both of the respondents from the Eindhoven region state this, there is an indication of triangulation. The other regions stated that they all can learn from Brainport Eindhoven and see it as one of their main partners in matching businesses between their respective regions. This is also supported by the cluster-organization Brainport Industries who acknowledge that the brand ‘Brainport’ serves its function in their network of businesses that steers like-minded businesses towards cooperation<sup>8,16</sup>. Lightyear One, a scale-up working with a new form of automotive transportation, has a lot to thank Brainport Development for in terms of lobbying for funding, access to entrepreneurial networks, and matchmaking. One interesting fact here was that Brainport Development and Lightyear refer to each other in their business activities such as mentioning each other as success-stories<sup>2,33</sup>, an indication of an *active* stance towards strategic alignment. REWIN in West-Brabant feels like they are a known organization among businesses in the region and hopes but cannot confirm their strategy is too. This would be due to the fact that according to REWIN, they have a small number of larger companies but a larger quantity of innovative SMEs



present in the region with which the regional strategy aligns and synergizes, and their efforts are more focused on innovative SMEs and Start-ups<sup>7,4</sup>. The respondent at AgriFood Capital, the region in the northeast of Brabant, admitted that their name and brand have their upsides and drawbacks regarding awareness in their region<sup>11,25</sup>. While the focus on the food sector is prominent and obvious, they also target their efforts on other sectors in the region like logistics and life sciences at Pivot Park despite what perhaps their name suggests. This makes it harder for entrepreneurs outside of the food sector to reach out and attend networking meetings and requires AgriFood Capital to identify and invite entrepreneurs instead of being found by entrepreneurs. This profiling of AgriFood Capital has therefore negatively affected awareness in the region according to the respondent<sup>11,29</sup>. Lastly, the region of Midpoint Brabant in the center of Brabant responded that businesses are more involved with their own agenda and strategy rather than Midpoint Brabant's strategy and therefore awareness of their strategy is lacking<sup>12,23</sup> hinting at an absence of the *active* stance of alignment in the region. But innovative SMEs do know where to find Midpoint Brabant and they still actively work on matchmaking and finding new cooperation's that tackle missions according to their strategy. So, the results regarding awareness between Midpoint Brabant and REWIN are comparable, while being different regions with different focusses, as described in the previous chapter.

According to the respondents of LifetecZONE, and a program-manager of BOM, the business' awareness of the provincial strategy is low<sup>1,4</sup>. The respondent of Brainport Industries, who work closely with over one hundred and fifty SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups, and larger corporations in total, supported this claim. The larger corporations may have some connection with the strategy if they were asked for their input in compiling the strategy but, according to the respondents, the follow-up during the strategy is lacking<sup>1,34</sup>. That would make the input just a singular moment of input. According to LifetecZONE, and the program-manager of BOM, they both argued that there could be continuous cooperation and working towards goals but currently, there is just this one moment every few years in which input is gathered for a new iteration of strategy for the province. This moment is then used as branding towards consumers to better profile their strategy and cooperative abilities<sup>1,36</sup>. The respondent of LifetecZONE and the program-manager of BOM stated that businesses have their own agendas and are not occupied with policy strategies, suggesting a *passive* stance of strategic alignment. This statement is also backed by Brainport Industries but the respondent noted that businesses do have interest in strategies when they are looking for funding but are not actively occupied with policy strategy rather than their own strategy<sup>1,7,8,8</sup>. The fact that multiple sources confirm this, is a sign of triangulation regarding this issue. The most interesting statement regarding this awareness made by the respondent of LifetecZONE and the program-manager of BOM was that "*Disclaimer*" should be used that all businesses are focused on a larger scale, at a minimum a national scale, regarding consumers, policies, and competitors and that the region is quickly outgrown<sup>1,61</sup>. This is further supported by the larger corporations on a regional and provincial level, Cosun and Fujifilm

in their respective regions, REWIN and Midpoint Brabant by the respondents of Cosun and Fujifilm. These organizations feel they have outgrown their regional foothold and have little to no connection to the region because of their status as global players, and therefore have little to gain by regional initiatives<sup>4,22;9,34</sup>. This also indicates triangulation for both the larger companies interviewed state this. Further in paragraph 6.1 however, Fujifilm mentions untapped potentials for collaboration within the region, suggesting potential further alignment. For those companies, the region they are settled in is now more incidental, this also applies to footloose companies, but the need to move to another location is absent because of adjacent suppliers. This could offer a challenge for the province to seek more connection with these companies and how they can be more incorporated into their respective region. However, these companies do work closely with the BOM and share the same ideals and missions. The facilitating of a healthy business climate is one key factor mentioned by Cosun<sup>4,60</sup>. This applies differently in one region of Noord-Brabant, Brainport Eindhoven. Being the largest and with the most global players where there is a very healthy business climate, a larger network of businesses in the same sector, the same mindset, and with Brainport as an internationally renowned region. The lack of connection with policy strategies could be linked to a statement made by Stimulus, who stated that the Netherlands have a little ailment of bureaucracy in with every organization must have their own notes with are all derived from each other, and they feel the need to wave them around, while the time is nigh for action regarding transitions, which is also a mandate of mission-driven policy<sup>6,151</sup>.

There are various interesting aspects regarding business' awareness of economic strategy on a provincial and regional scales that need to be highlighted. First of all, there is a distinct difference between Brainport and the other regions where Brainport is vastly more developed in terms of the awareness of the organization and its strategy, which, as seen in the previous chapter, is further developed and more encompassing than those of the other regions. Secondly, there is a difference in awareness of regional and provincial strategy. There seems to be a larger extent of awareness on regional strategy, mostly directed at Brainport Eindhoven, than on provincial strategy, hinting at a larger role of regional strategies compared to provincial strategy. And lastly, while awareness of provincial strategy may be lower, the business' awareness of the BOM's is not for they are the executive party of the province and therefore more engaged and present with businesses. And being an executive party of the province, they share the same ideals and overlap in many aspects of strategy and therefore coincidentally collaborate with businesses on behalf of that strategy.

### 5.1.2. Support

The feeling of support in the economic strategies and therefore the next part of the first sub-question is examined in this subparagraph. So, what kind of support do the activities of the organizations who develop the strategies provide for businesses and how do businesses experience support?

This sub-paragraph has a strong connection with chapter 4 in which the tools and services provided through each strategy are detailed. What all respondents can agree on is the fact that the strategies aim for cooperation and networking and/or matchmaking. Generally, since the province is most of all a policy maker, they experience this less with the province, although the BOM being the

executive organization of the province, this support may be indirect according to the respondents of LifetecZONE<sup>1,85</sup>. The cooperation, networking, and matchmaking are focused on SMEs, start-ups, and scale-ups. For the larger corporations spoken with, Cosun and Fujifilm, have little to gain from these networks and cooperation on the scale they are operating in. This is less true for Fujifilm because their Japanese business-style interferes with making solid investments in the later stages of cooperation but they do see opportunities in the local network<sup>9,58</sup>. Regarding Cosun, spinoffs and smaller affiliates have the most to gain from regional and provincial strategy and therefore the respondent acknowledged that projects are being done on a regional scale but could not provide insight into these projects for the respondent was part of higher management<sup>4,44</sup>. There could therefore be a more indirect effect through their spinoffs and affiliates. The interviewed business in the Brainport Eindhoven region, Lightyear, represents a societal mission. The respondent of Lightyear disclosed that while having good relations with Brainport Development, they also seek funding through them. Additionally, Lightyear could still use more lobbying capacity in order to secure more funds and subsidies as they do not have that capacity to scale up themselves and they are still losing many subsidies to bigger players in the region such as ASML, VDL, and DAF<sup>2,45</sup>. The respondent also mentioned that the attraction of talent is also a primary goal in the strategy of Brainport Eindhoven but due to lack of housing Lightyear loses promising talented workers to foreign businesses<sup>2,35</sup>.

When looking at the previous chapter, one can see that supporting and facilitating SMEs, start-ups, and scale-ups are broadly promoted and that the strategies are focused on that segment of businesses. This is also supported by all the Triple-Helix organizations, and the BOM, as they work closely with the innovative SMEs in their respective region. This takes shape in multiple forms but always has an interactive nature in which entrepreneurs speak to each other to create new ideas and concepts, look for new partnerships and opportunities, and for matchmaking to link businesses together. The respondent of Brainport Development indicated that *networking* alone could also be a reason to seek alignment with regional and/or provincial strategy<sup>3,31</sup>. Growing networks and creating new contacts can, as indicated by the respondent, be highly valuable in order to seek out opportunities for new business-cases as cooperative partners. This could therefore be an addition to the conceptual model and directly leads to economic gain through social means and therefore could be placed in a nexus between *Social Motivation* and *Economic Motivation* in the conceptual model (figure 1). Besides the networking and matchmaking, all investigated organizations which have their own strategy indicated that there are also funds available to further develop promising businesses cases and ventures. These funds are mostly dedicated to helping businesses with innovative concepts, so again, there is a focus on SMEs and upcoming start-ups and scale-ups. One aspect highlighted by the respondents of LifetecZONE and the program-manager of BOM is that additional tools and services can also be implemented in the form of vouchers. Businesses can apply for these vouchers which grant an expert in a certain to be hired for them for a certain amount of time to help develop a business-case for example, or to help make their business more sustainable<sup>1,8;1,76</sup>.

Regarding the experienced support, a few aspects discussed above stand out and provide an answer for the sub-question. First of all, all strategies have an explicit focus on cooperation, networking, and matchmaking. Regional strategies are more hands-on than provincial strategies, but businesses that also cooperate with the BOM may be supported on a provincial scale. Second, larger companies could experience less support because of the scale they are operating in and therefore see the regional relevance lacking for their business-activities, and not all large companies may experience this in the same way. Third, support is felt according to the respondents through contact with other parties like other entrepreneurs, businesses, and organizations. There is also an insight provided by the respondent of Brainport Development regarding networking as a motive to seek alignment. Lastly, the forms of support experienced could mean social support in the form of business-contacts and having dialogues with other parties but also through financial and business-support means in the form of funds and vouchers.

## 5.2 The shift towards societal missions and transitional goals and its benefits for businesses

Mission-driven policy is the current benchmark for regional and provincial strategy. In this subparagraph, this shift towards these policies is discussed with the respondents and includes the perspectives of the respondents and how they believe businesses and the perspectives of the businesses interviewed themselves experience this shift and this new benchmark.

The first notable insight provided by the respondents was that businesses need to have the ability to make the shift towards operating by societal missions and goals. In the interview with AgriFood Capital, the respondent commended the ideals of mission-driven policy and indicated that public awareness is evident due to actualities about climate etc<sup>10,116</sup>. However, this kind of policy could be quite fragile. The respondent indicated that when a new ministry is formed and the economic department on a national scale has alternate leadership, this policy could change and another course could be taken, which influences all economic activity. The respondent gave an example that if sugar-tax is implemented or subsidies for composting are changed, the entire production-chain they work closely with alters and could become more or less attractive<sup>11,132</sup>. This can lead to an increase/impulse in businesses activity around biobased if it was made more attractive and could accelerate the food-transition. Therefore, the respondent argued, it is still important to facilitate a healthy business-, entrepreneurial-, and innovative-climate besides working towards the missions and transitions. The respondent at Midpoint Brabant also stated that businesses are mainly focused on their own activities and competitive position. Operating socially responsible certainly helps with that competitive position but businesses do not always have that capacity. But operating socially responsible is definitely increasing the respondent indicated<sup>12,33</sup>. This is also supported by the respondent of AgriFood Capital<sup>10,116</sup>. This indicates that while there certainly is *Economic Motivation* as suggested by the conceptual model (figure 1.), there are also hindrances to accomplish alignment. The respondent of the AWTI elaborated further that established businesses, who have vested interests in how their activities are today, can counteract this shift in policy. She named examples like Shell and Tata-steel who are big players in the country but have vested interests in fossil fuels and would like to keep it that way<sup>5,96</sup>. Additionally, the respondent at Fujifilm did admit that there may be more opportunities for further ventures in the regional network with businesses now not known to them and looks to BOM to be the connecting link to find those players in the regional network. In this case, the ability is there, but for additional business-ventures to be found, there is a reliance on a third party like the BOM<sup>9,90</sup>.

The respondents praise the view of mission-driven policy and perceive it as the way towards the future. In West-Brabant the respondent of REWIN pleaded that the new way of thinking by means of missions, in a broader sense, is the way forward. By developing economic ecosystems and cooperating with surrounding regions societal missions and transitions can be tackled more

effectively<sup>7,20</sup>. The interviewed respondent at Stimulus disclosed that the earlier top-sector policy did not work properly from practice<sup>6,71</sup>. Mission-driven policy is much broader and offers more scope for SMEs, also stipulating the broadness of the role of mission-driven strategy<sup>6,83</sup>. The first of the businesses spoken with, Lightyear, resides in the Brainport region. The respondent agreed that the company embodies a transition (towards emission-less driving) and is therefore happy with the shift. It makes the business grow further due to subsidies and they can use the attention on societal missions and transitional goals for attracting investors. While they do not have a fully-fledged external CSR policy towards the public and investors because of their limited capacity, their business-model is centered around a transition itself<sup>2,17</sup>. The presence of CSR-policy was questioned here to test social motivation and the awareness of it is an indication of operating socially responsible regarding societal missions and transitions. In the interviews with the other, larger companies Cosun and Fujifilm, both respondents told that operating according to CSR, in a socially responsible manner and developing business-cases around a societal issue, need or transitional is already happening in their companies<sup>4,24;9,70</sup>. This indicates triangulation regarding the statement that not all businesses need to have an encompassing CSR policy to operate socially responsible in correspondence with mission-driven policy. The shift in policy is therefore positive because it sheds more light on the pressing matters and helps them to further these business cases and spin-offs in their innovative ventures. The respondent of Brainport Industries, also in the Brainport region, inherent to the high-tech sector, sees an increase in technological businesses cooperating to tackle societal missions and transitions due to the shift in policy, further highlighting the impact and future potential of said policy<sup>8,16</sup>.

One key insight provided by the respondents was the impact of mindset in order to accelerate the shift. On a provincial scale, the respondents of LifetecZONe, and the program-manager of BOM argued strategy and the societal missions are not the primary focus of businesses, it needs to be in a context businesses can relate to<sup>1,21</sup>. Furthermore, they said that the mindset of the CEO or management can heavily influence whether the business goes along with the shift and strategy or keeps focused on their own activities<sup>1,22</sup>. The respondents at Brainport Industries and AWTI had the same perspective on how, on a personal level, mindset (particularly of higher management) can be of importance for business activities and holding societal missions and transitions in high regard<sup>5,124;8,24</sup>. Therefore, there is triangulation by multiple sources regarding the importance of mindset. In the interview with the respondent of Brainport Development the topic of the former technology push in the region came up and how they aim to embed technology for challenges. Brainport Development chooses different key technologies to focus on and to combine with their strategy, having similarities with the technology push supported by Philips earlier in the region. That coincides with working on societal missions and transitional goals. The respondent indicated that the focus on new technologies suites Brainport Development and that this push has traction in the region. It makes businesses share the mindset to tackle challenges and work towards missions and transitions. The choosing of key



technologies to focus on and markets to tap into have made the regional strategy successful but it requires making daring choices the respondent said<sup>3,14</sup>. The respondent of Brainport Development also stated that the organization had spoken with a large number of local businesses in order to formulate a direction for their strategy and the feedback from those meetings was the need to focus on societal missions and transitions, and therefore already had its support base in terms of mindset from businesses in the region<sup>3,8</sup>. This sheds more light on *Social Motivation* and enlarges the role of *Trust/Attitude* to also include *Mindset* in the conceptual model (figure 1).

In order to make the shift, the main challenge, as stated by the respondents, is to develop profitable business-cases and -models. The respondent of AWTI explained that on a national scale the traction for mission-driven policy is increasing but it has its challenges. The main challenge is that businesses need to keep being profitable while also developing a new revenue model to comply with the shift as also mentioned before by other respondents<sup>4,40</sup>. The respondent argued that is not a case of willingness for SMEs it is mostly not having the means, which coincides with the statements of the respondent of REWIN<sup>7,64</sup>. The respondent at Stimulus supported that it remains a challenge to develop a profitable business-case around a societal mission or transition<sup>6,91</sup>. The shift does offer an increase in experimentation between businesses and those experiments know many successes<sup>6,96</sup>. Internally Stimulus is also heavily focused on granting subsidies to businesses based on societal missions and the respondent explained that their organization sees an increase of appliers and grants which shows that there is also an inherent increase in businesses that can develop a profitable business-case around societal missions and transitions. And additionally, the respondent from REWIN admitted that their earlier iteration of economic strategy was lacking a dot on the horizon and now they are working on a broader strategy, which coincides with mission-driven strategy. The creation of a business-case that is in line with these missions and goals remains a challenge and it is not something that can easily be changed according to the respondent at REWIN<sup>7,20</sup>.

Regarding the shift towards mission-driven strategies, the most important insights given by the respondents are the following: 1. While this shift is appreciated and perhaps even needed because it shows how businesses should operate in the near future, not a lot of businesses are able to make the shift themselves due to lack of capacity and/or focus on mainly their own business activities and keeping afloat. 2. On a personal level, societal missions and transitions are very much present and this change in mindset could influence and steer business activities towards operating more socially responsible and sustainable. 3. The main challenge remains developing profitable business-cases and -models, especially for SMEs with less capacity to dive into those ventures if they are willing to make the shift but cannot develop a profitable business-case for the long term.

In the next chapter, the last sub-question regarding optimization of policy and alignment is explored and presents the final part of the results of this research.

## Chapter 6. Optimization of the alignment between businesses and strategies

This final chapter deals with the last posed sub-question: *“How can the alignment between businesses in Noord-Brabant and regional economic innovation strategy be further optimized from a business-perspective?”*. To provide an answer for this question the same method is applied as in the previous chapter, a qualitative method where interviews were conducted in order to achieve deeper insights into the perspective of businesses. These perspectives are then complemented with insights of different other organizations like AWTI, Stimulus, the Triple Helix-organisations, and cluster organizations. Therefore, various suggestions and opportunities for optimization of alignment are being identified by the respondents which this chapter aims to bundle and discuss in order to help answer the main question but also to identify further opportunities and where to find them.

### 6.1 Optimization

This paragraph examines the insights and statements given by respondents regarding the last sub-question. The respondents respond on how they believe businesses could be more engaged with the regional strategy and where they believe opportunities lie for further cooperation between businesses and governmental organizations regarding mission-driven strategy. The efforts of all the interviewed organizations and businesses to achieve better alignment are also disclosed.

The first and most important insight from the respondents was that for economic agencies reaching out to interact with businesses and finding the right people, with the right mindset within those businesses is key in order to further accelerate and optimize the shift and seek alignment. The following statements by the respondent show that social interaction is the preferred way of achieving this. The respondent at Brainport Development stated that the current situation regarding how businesses align with the strategy and their knowledge of the strategy is fine. As long as they know how to find Brainport Development and know what the organization can do for them, not much else has to be changed<sup>3,43</sup>. The respondent indicated that the intrinsic ability of businesses to seek opportunities is more important. On cooperation regarding mission-driven strategy, the respondent stated that for example, the energy-transition is not going to be solved within this region alone. Throughout different regions, everyone has a little piece of the and those puzzle-pieces that need to be combined<sup>3,49</sup>. Cooperation on a higher scale is needed and businesses in the entire nation need to be aligned in order to tackle such large missions.

The respondent of REWIN indicated that there is the aim to write a new compact document in which they disclose what the future encompasses<sup>7,86</sup>. This document would disclose how parties cooperate within the region and how they aim to formulate a new vision with which they would like to reach out to entrepreneurs in the region. This is a means to get more entrepreneurs together to get a larger group of sparring-partners to talk about societal missions and transitions on a structural basis. The

aim is then to get more parties towards the same goal to create a larger impact. In order to enhance cooperation between businesses and governmental organizations they are setting up a 'venture-café' tied to societal missions and transitions and would function as a place where entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial people from governmental- and knowledge-institutions can meet and discuss societal themes and come up with new ideas<sup>7,88</sup>. The respondent at Midpoint Brabant supported this and notes that by clustering businesses in a region and sustaining and developing a network in which businesses and organizations talk with each other contributes to alignment<sup>11,17</sup>.

In order to achieve greater cooperation and alignment, AgriFood Capital is organizing entrepreneurial meetings '*ondernemers-tafels*' to get established businesses and SMEs together and to inform them about what AgriFood Capital has to offer in terms of cooperation<sup>10,112</sup>. For businesses, this need for cooperation is increasing due to a less available workforce, that influences production and growth<sup>10,116</sup>. By breaking into the daily routine of businesses and helping realize opportunities, much can be achieved. But getting in contact with businesses regarding societal missions and goals can be difficult due to the primary focus on own business activities<sup>10,118</sup>. Finding the right people in businesses can be challenging because not always the CEO but one management layer beneath the CEO are the people busy with strategy, know the connection in the region, and have the appropriate mindset as discussed previously<sup>10,144</sup>. An important message the respondent pleaded for was to link societal interests to individual interests of a business in order to have a good discussion with businesses regarding societal interests.

The cluster-organization Brainport Industries looked at this from the perspective of their members, mainly suppliers in the high-tech manufacturing industry, and stated that their members sought the opportunity to come together and talk about how to produce in a more sustainable manner and to eliminate for example resources from rogue mines and to make clients demand such specifications on their needs<sup>8,40</sup>.

Fujifilm, the business interviewed in that region disclosed that they have more interaction with Brainport compared to other regions as their competencies align more regarding High-Tech industries and they find partners for business-ventures more easily there, also concerning societal missions and goals<sup>9,32</sup>. The respondent did believe however that there could be untapped opportunities within the regional network and could make more effort in order to seek those opportunities<sup>9,96</sup>. The respondent did mention that their corporate culture could make large financial investments difficult to the Japanese way of doing business as mentioned before<sup>9,58</sup>. Fujifilm has a strong connection with BOM as being their matchmaker and eyes and ears within their region to look for co-operational partners and are foregoing Midpoint Brabant for those matters<sup>9,108</sup>. The respondent indicated that they could help SMEs by talking and sharing about their experience in the energy-transition and on that aspect

align more with Midpoint Brabant's needs and could align more or cooperate more with Midpoint Brabant<sup>9,88</sup>.

The respondent at Stimulus pleaded for an increase in working in concrete projects instead of broad sustainable themes. Sustainable concrete projects, on whatever scale, need to be further promoted and require driven people with a vision, a bottom-up approach. But for this approach to work governmental organizations could be more facilitating and cooperative to contribute to these projects. For example, by finding suppliers to realize a block of sustainable housing in a municipality for example<sup>6,146</sup>.

The AWTI respondent argued that vested interests of large established, influential businesses hold back the shift towards societal missions and transitions. This is because their current business activities are the way they would like them to be currently, the fossil-fuel/resource businesses for instance. This holding back of the shift can be addressed through the means of making alternatives more attractive or making current operations for these businesses harder through legislation<sup>5,46</sup>. Another way to optimize alignment with strategy is to make current networks and clusters of businesses more open. With this openness, it will be more accessible for other businesses or 'unusual suspects' to enter the network and look for cooperations<sup>5,96</sup>. However, this is not something an economic development agency can do, networks and clusters determine this predominately by themselves.

The second insight provided by the respondents was that in order to achieve more alignment and for businesses to cooperate in keeping with societal missions and transitions, one needs to keep their business-context in mind in order to be concrete.

For businesses to align more with strategy, Triple-helix organizations and regional developers need to keep strategy close to their needs and business context told the respondent of AgriFood Capital. As discussed in the previous chapter the current challenge of AgriFood Capital is their branding and focus and the challenge that they may not be familiar with many innovative (non-food) SMEs in the region because of that<sup>10,24</sup>.

The respondent of Lightyear indicated that there could be more focus on start- and scale-ups in the region when it comes to funding and talent to ensure future growth within the region<sup>2,59</sup>.

The interviewed business from the West-Brabant region, Cosun, is mainly focused on an international level the respondent disclosed. The tackling of the food-transition is one of their foundations and operating socially responsible is highly valued. They have their own innovation-center in which they aim to create new innovative products and business-models. And as mentioned in the previous chapter, they feel they have little to directly gain with regionally focused initiatives but others in their consortium and their partners do. And for that reason, the respondent indicated, they would like to see that strategy also focus on sustaining and developing the business-climate, attraction of talent, housing, and accessibility in the region<sup>4,58</sup>.

The final insight regarding optimization of alignment was to help businesses develop profitable business-cases and minimize financial risk short-term when businesses switch to a new business-case in keeping with societal missions and transitions. The respondent of LifetecZONE and the program-manager of BOM indicated that the distribution of funds to provinces by the government for certain missions and transitions differs per province. Initiatives lift-off in those regions which received additional funds instead of Noord-Brabant, where businesses then struggle to finance a similar initiative. According to these respondents, businesses mainly look towards governmental organizations for funds, so the availability of funds is an important aspect and incentive<sup>1,59</sup>. Support programs for businesses on how to make their business more sustainable and vouchers to hire an expert focused on sustainability are also needed that are more business-friendly in addition to the current OPZuid and REACT-EU<sup>1,76</sup>.

The respondent of AWTI also discussed that much of mission-driven innovation policy is aimed at lowering the risk for businesses in form of co-investing to reduce financial risk. Governmental organizations can also make innovation-oriented purchases by stating that for example a circular viaduct is needed and, in that way, support the market for a sustainable product, suggesting a top-down approach<sup>5,54</sup>.

One suggestion came from the respondent of Midpoint Brabant which entailed that by promising to shift legislation in the favour of businesses, which gives them more certainty on policy changes and helps them mitigate financial risk, they will see more benefits and profits. However, this is not something an organization can promise lightly or has the authority to do, but if possible and supported by the government, could have a large impact<sup>11,148</sup>. Supporting businesses in creating a profitable business-case would definitely speed up transitions and let businesses feel more supported in strategic context because then they feel more involved, the respondent at Midpoint Brabant argued.

Another suggestion came from the respondent of Brainport Industries. According to this respondent, businesses often want to show that they are operating sustainably, supported by data. However, there is a lack of solid measuring instruments with which businesses can validly show that they are operating sustainably and receive a certain rating to monitor this and to be used directly or indirectly for branding purposes. Governmental organizations could contribute to the development of solid measuring instruments for this aspect<sup>8,50</sup>.

The suggestion of the respondent of Stimulus about drastically reducing the number of nota's and to have Triple-helix organizations not have nota's or develop nota's<sup>6,151</sup> is supported by the respondent of REWIN who also stipulated the frighteningly high number of nota's and strategies in West-Brabant<sup>7,94</sup>.

To conclude this paragraph and formulate an answer to the sub-question reflection on the results mentioned above is required. One of the main insights and consensus was that outreach towards businesses was of grave importance in order to accelerate transitions and raise awareness of

the issues at hand. This entails for development agencies and governmental institutions to keep reaching out to businesses who can further benefit from the shift and to find the right people, with the right mindset, within those businesses, stipulating the importance of *Social Motivation* (figure 1), and more specifically the addition of *Mindset* (chapter 5) in order to accelerate the shift towards mission drive policy. Organizing meetings of different kinds to bring entrepreneurs and businesses together and maintaining the dialogue contributes to the shift and on who businesses see further cooperation regarding the societal missions and transitions in the future. The challenges identified by the respondents are for businesses to contribute and keep contributing to missions and transitions, the context needs to be close to their business's activities and must be concrete for them. The other challenge is to help businesses realize and create profitable business-cases in order to spend resources on societal missions and transitions which also benefit their businesses because no business is going to invest in ventures that are not profitable albeit short or long term. This requires changes in legislation as discussed earlier and innovative purchases which may have too much financial risk in the short term.

## 6.2 Role of the Brabantse Ontwikkelings Maatschappij

The role of the BOM, amongst other activities, is to sustainably reinforce Brabant's economy by helping businesses develop on societal themes, internationalization, and investing. The respondents were also asked how they currently perceive the role of the BOM. This was done in order for feedback on the BOM from the development agencies and businesses they work with and to provide input to the BOM's way of operating with these parties.

Generally, the role of the BOM was evaluated positively and BOM is praised for its skills in matchmaking, networking, having well-informed employees, and connecting knowledge between businesses and organizations. The BOM is said to be more serviceable and out-reaching in comparison with previous periods. The respondent at Fujifilm stated that the BOM functions as their eyes and ears regarding what is relevant to their business-activities and also does this in an international context. The BOM is in this case an important partner for future ventures for Fujifilm as a matchmaker on different scales<sup>9,108</sup>.

One suggestion came from the respondent of Midpoint Brabant who argued that while operating in a good manner the BOM has a tendency to make a "*menu*" and can benefit from further *interventiologica* or *Theory of Change* but describes the BOM as a powerful organization and link between businesses and government<sup>11,69</sup>. The respondent at REWIN also credited the BOM for their course of action nowadays<sup>7,100</sup>.

All results will be examined and summarized in the following chapter, *Conclusion*, and an answer for the main research question is formulated. Lastly, the recommendations subtracted from this research are discussed in the final chapter, *Recommendations*.



## Chapter 7. Conclusion

In order to answer the main question formulated at the beginning of this research: *“To what extent do businesses in Noord-Brabant experience alignment with the regional economic innovation strategy that is shifting towards societal missions?”*, the formulated sub-questions will first be answered. The previous chapters dealt with answering the questions and this chapter delves deeper into these answers and interprets them for conclusions, building up to the main question.

In chapter 4. *Economic Innovation Strategies in Noord-Brabant* the first posed sub-question was answered, an overview of the different economic innovation strategies in Noord-Brabant was given and the similarities and differences outlined. The answer to the sub-question in that chapter: *“What does the regional economic development innovation strategy (in Noord-Brabant and its four Triple-Helix regions) that is currently focusing on societal missions look like?”* provided a summarized overview and context for this research. In all strategies developed by the various economic development organizations, there was an apparent focus on societal missions and transitional goals. Clearly, the mission-driven strategy as described by Mazzucato (2018) has made landfall in Noord-Brabant. Furthermore, each strategy was strongly focused on the strengths in each specific regional economy, for example, Brainport on High-Tech, AgriFood Capital on foodsystems and consumption. The role of the BOM was clearly different as it also included a more outward perspective on opportunities outside of the province, on a national and international scale. Investments, internationalization and a detailed ecosystem-approach were also included in BOM’s strategy. Furthermore, all strategies that were investigated directly call for action regarding the societal missions and transitions. This stipulates the importance of the shift towards mission-driven policy and way of thinking and radiating it outward to their contacts and network. To give the corresponding sub-question a concrete answer is to look at the provided overview in table 1 keeping in the mind the discussed differences and similarities and mentioning that the province of Noord-Brabant has strategies with their own agenda and focusses.

The next chapter, 5. *Business-perspective on the economic strategies of Noord-Brabant* firstly discusses awareness and support regarding strategy. It’s important to differentiate between businesses’ awareness with regional strategy and the regional development agency that develops and executes that particular strategy. In general, businesses are more familiar with the agencies than with the strategies. Brainport Development came forth as being a strong well-connected agency and familiar with businesses throughout the region and beyond compared to the economic development agencies in other regions concerning the awareness of the strategy. The businesses in that region know how to find Brainport Development and what the organization could do for them. There is also a difference regarding awareness between the regional and the provincial strategy. Overall, businesses are more aware of the regional strategy compared to the provincial strategy. Even though many businesses work with the BOM instead of directly with the province, BOM still executes the provincial strategy and they are more familiar with the BOM’s agenda and strategy. The insights regarding support felt by the strategies also need to be highlighted in order to formulate an answer for this sub-question. All strategies support businesses through the means of cooperation, networking, matchmaking, and funding, which is solely done by the BOM. The regional scale on which this happens is less attractive for the larger companies interviewed. Their business-activities do not line up well with the regional strategies, they claim. Furthermore, networking as a motive to seek alignment with



economic strategy is an important new insight coming from this research. Through networking businesses can themselves seek new business-opportunities with new partners and grow their network. Lastly, support can be felt in different ways, socially through dialogue and also economically where economic development organizations can financially help with business-ventures through funds and vouchers. The fact that businesses are not aware of a strategy's existence, does not mean they are not supported by them. Awareness and support are therefore different aspects and they can complement each other.

The second sub-question in chapter 5 was regarding the shift towards mission-driven policy and how businesses see this shift and what the benefits are for them. The shift towards mission-driven strategy was unanimously appreciated and needed in the current, pressing context. This is because businesses struggle to make the shift themselves due to their limited capacity and focus on their own business activities. This mission-driven policy helps businesses to reflect on how they could and should operate in the near future in a better world. On a personal level societal missions and transitions are pressing and the CEO/higher level management's mindset influences, steers, and strongly determines business-activities towards contributing to these missions and transitions. The respondents of Triple-Helix organizations, and the program-manager of the BOM, agree that the main challenge is to help SMEs with little capacity realize and develop profitable business-cases and -models around the societal missions and transitions in Noord-Brabant. The willingness is there but the capacity may not be. That is also the answer for this sub-question: businesses think the shift towards societal missions and transitional goals in strategies is good and beneficial, however, they are not always themselves able to relate to their business-activities and make a profit. This conclusion tends to be generalizable due to *triangulation of sources* since multiple respondents stated this.

Chapter 6, the final results chapter dealt with the fourth sub-question: *"How can the alignment between businesses in Noord-Brabant and regional economic innovation strategy be further optimized from a business-perspective?"*. The identification of further opportunities was the central theme of this question and therefore insights of all respondents were explored. Reaching out towards business is necessary to increase and accelerate transitions and help businesses towards the future. This happens and needs to continue to happen through dialogue between businesses and the Triple-helix organizations, the province, and the BOM. This can have many forms but needs to bring parties together to discuss issues at hand regarding societal missions and transitions. The challenge is to be relevant for businesses and stay close to their business-activities and therefore goals need to be made concrete for them to join initiatives, projects, and discussions. Another challenge here is to find the right people within the businesses who share the vision and has an open mind towards tackling societal missions and goals, as long as it stays close to the business activities. This may not be the CEO necessarily but can also be another person in management. Opportunities are also in helping create and supporting profitable but sustainable business-cases. These may be profitable in the long term, but SMEs, Startups, and Scale-ups may not have the means, in terms of capacity and funds, to think in the long term. These conclusions are also confirmed by multiple respondents with different backgrounds which could make them generalizable due to *triangulation of sources*.

To conclude the main research question is cited once again; *"To what extent do businesses in Noord-Brabant experience alignment with the regional economic innovation strategy that is shifting towards societal missions?"*. The answer to this question is obviously not simple and needs to be answered through the sub-questions besides from the first describing sub-question. Businesses in

Noord-Brabant do experience alignment, but it differs per strategy, per region, between the regions, and per size of business (including for example higher management's mindset). Noord-Brabant is host to many businesses of many shapes, sectors and sizes. SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups, and larger companies all experience alignment in different ways, and differ in each region. Looking back at the conceptual model (figure 1) the main factors which cause this differentiation between the regions and businesses are *social motivation* and *economic motivation*. The impact of individual mindset towards mission-driven policy and societal goals and transitions is substantial and defining according to the respondents as mentioned before. This conclusion can therefore be generalized and could be useful in other cases like other regions or different scales, the national scale for example. The challenge to cash in on opportunities and improve ever remains but can be helped forward through cooperation and dialogue. These conclusions can be used by the BOM in this case of Noord-Brabant, being the executive party of the province. Furthermore, this case and this research can be of use for other similar cases or on other scales who then can use the corresponding insights to further investigate and optimize the shift towards mission-driven policy and to reflect on economic innovation strategies.

## Chapter 8. Discussion

The *Discussion* chapter of this research explores several elements. First of all, the results which are described in the *Conclusion* are interpreted and new insights are enlightened. Second, the previously thought-out expectations are reflected upon. Then, the limitations and implications of the research are discussed. And last, recommendations for follow-up research are disclosed.

The gathered results match expectations as described in chapter 2. The different regional strategies each have their own identity and each regional organization has its own relation with businesses. As expected, a business' alignment with the regional economic strategy depends on both social and economic motivations. The level of motivation for each business differs from SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups, and larger companies and between the investigated regions. Innovative businesses differ in the extent to which they are dealing with societal missions and transitions. However, overall this research shows that the shift towards mission-driven strategy is a welcome and needed one, as confirmed by businesses. Some businesses may be unaware of the strategy, and intrinsically find ways to operate responsibly and explore new socially valuable ventures. Other businesses are looking for a profitable business model to cope with the shift. Some unexpected insights came forth during the research. One striking unexpected insight was that on a personal level of higher management / CEO, awareness of societal missions and transitions could have a stronger effect on social business-activities than previously expected. The influence of one person's mindset on steering business-activities proved strong. *Mindset* could therefore be added to the conceptual model of this research in addition to attitude/trust for its great role. Mindset and news actualities that affect mindset on a personal level, does therefore have a larger impact than previously expected. Another striking outcome was that *networking* and collaboration by businesses could also be seen as motivation to seek alignment with the regional strategy. The motivation of *networking* could therefore be added to the conceptual model. This aspect falls in a nexus between social and economic motivation for it is at first glance a social motivation but quickly turns into the economic kind. With the results, this research has indicated that each region and strategy have a different relation with the businesses it aims to assist and the change it aims to make. The identification of opportunities for optimization of the strategies also came forth from this research and opens the door for further investigations and implementations.

As per the expectations described in the hypotheses, there was a difference in alignment experienced by different kinds of businesses in each region, and a multitude of changes for further improvement was identified. What was also expected at the start of this research was the fact that although the examined regions differ, the differences between the regions are prominent and each region struggles with its own challenges. Opportunities for optimization are identified and according recommendations can be made for the future and with that, the expectation to be able to do so is met and executed. What was not expected was the large impact of specifically *mindset* on the perspective to societal missions and goals and acting on societal missions and goals. It shows that one or a small number of people within a business could heavily steer business-activities.

Every research has its own limitations. One limitation of this research is the limited number of businesses interviewed. While the method of the research is based on data-triangulation through speaking with different organizations and businesses and trying to generalize their insights and perspectives when they overlap, the number of involved businesses in the entire context of the

research is substantially larger; 332.818 businesses in Noord-Brabant in 2021 according to Bedrijvenmonitor (2021). However, the results do provide insight into challenges faced and opportunities that arise regarding the subject of this thesis, and the results of this research could apply to a larger number of businesses and therefore insights from this research could be extrapolated. And this being a case study it will always be limited to a confined case and subject within that case. Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter 2, when respondents share the same perspectives and insights, like regarding the role of mindset, these results do tend to be generalizable due to triangulation. Albeit a limitation of the research, the number of businesses and the gathered data could always be used in future reference. Another limitation of this research is the lack of researcher-triangulation in which multiple researchers question the same subject with the same methods. There is no known previous study done into this subject regarding the selected case of Noord-Brabant and therefore nothing to compare results with.

The implications of the conducted research are in line with those described in chapter 2 *Relevance*. Furthermore, the last sub-question was aimed at future implications based on how alignment could be further enhanced. The cashing-in of opportunities to enhance alignment and to stimulate and/or accelerate the shift towards mission-driven policy is the main implication of this research. But before that can happen, other factors count. This research is also aimed at gauging the awareness of economic innovation strategies and how businesses were supported by them and therefore provide insight into the status quo of these factors throughout the region to a certain degree.

Reflecting on the research and gathering feedback from the interviews several recommendations for follow-up research arise. The first recommendation is to conduct research into the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on the different economic innovation strategies in Noord-Brabant. The described goals and focus could have been negatively influenced by COVID-19 because the entire economy was negatively affected by the pandemic. This follow-up research could be done by investigating the yearly reports made by corresponding organizations. The influence of the pandemic could be significant for it influenced consumer behavior substantially. It could also have caused a shift in economic priorities, for a circular economy is less dependent on foreign materials while at the same time contributing to sustainable ambitions. Second, follow-up research regarding other provinces or regions in the Netherlands would be helpful. While the province of Noord-Brabant was the subject of this research, similar research can be done elsewhere, and a comparison can be made. This could help improve policy or code of conduct in order to identify more opportunities, also on a higher scale. With those results, regions and/or provinces can learn from each other. The next recommendation for follow-up research is focused on the differences in businesses. Because of the sheer number of innovative businesses and the restrictions of this research regarding the number of businesses interviewed, this could be further explored. Experienced alignment by SMEs, start-ups, scale-ups, and large companies can be explored further for these are just collective names. Zooming in on each of these collective names regarding alignment with strategies offers an opportunity for more insight into where and how alignment is experienced and to what extent. Finally, the last recommendation opts for a sectoral approach in which different sectors; food, high-tech, logistics, tourism healthcare, etc. One can imagine that the transition to societal goals is easier for businesses in sectors such as food, health, or energy. This could provide a more detailed view of each sector and may provide recommendations more specific for each sector.

## Chapter 9. Recommendations

In order to give concrete recommendations on how to improve alignment between businesses and economic innovation strategy, one must look at the last posed sub-question. Because of the nature of this question, the posed recommendations of this chapter are an extension of that question.

Reaching out to businesses and letting them see that there may be opportunities within their activities for more sustainability or making their business processes more circular for example, is a major part of optimization. The challenge for businesses whose core business case is less involved in sustainability of circularity, for example, the need to see these opportunities is more dire, because there is more to gain. And for businesses who already contribute to societal missions and goals, there may be more they could do. The BOM is involved in both these kinds of businesses in order to further help them operate more sustainably towards the future. In order to achieve more societal missions and goals for businesses, there is a need for mapping which businesses can benefit from additional effort and outreach. This could be done through an online marketing campaign for example and the goal is to have the same renown as enjoyed by the Brainport region, where there are fewer challenges for businesses to find them and reach out themselves. By branding on a regional and provincial scale and voicing the values and missions each region stands for and how that relates to businesses and society this outreach can be accelerated. While this could take a long period of time to establish and research, it could have positive consequences for more businesses can contribute and are drawn in into the policy shift long-term. Be careful to keep the shift relevant for said businesses in order to have them engaged for businesses could be focused solely on their own business-activities. This recommendation will accelerate the tackling of societal missions and transitions if implemented.

A second recommendation is to financially support businesses when they are reached, the next step is helping businesses implement or see profitable business-cases which address directly, or indirectly societal missions and transitions is vital. The BOM is already heavily involved in this but in order to do this, however, larger amounts of available funding are needed. This would be to bridge the gap between currently profitable businesses-cases to smart business-cases which are profitable long term through covering investments. And the current state-aid regulations can be an obstacle. By doing this the financial risk of changing business-cases, and not being profitable in the short-term afterward, is taken away.

Another important recommendation is to keep the dialogue close to the business context. This makes sure that businesses see the use of the shift in the context of their own practices. This is an ongoing process that happens continuously, but every additional effort, funding, or capacity for this helps accelerate the shift. An instrument that can be of help here is to differentiate entrepreneurs in the SME segment like Belás et al. (2018) did in their research regarding factors of financial risk. They concluded that entrepreneurs who started their business because they considered it their mission perceived that they could manage their risk correctly in comparison with entrepreneurs who started because of making money, who perceived this more intensely. This instrument could therefore be used to 'pick winners' or the right candidates to receive financial support to invest in a long-term business-case. Doh & Kim (2014) furthermore highlight the importance of governmental support for SMEs to help innovation and growth and detail how this works in the province of Gyeongbuk in South

Korea which houses the industries of electronic information devices, HTSM, Life-science and Health, and cultural tourism.

The last recommendation may lie beyond the scope of this research and can also be considered for more future research but is still worth mentioning. As touched upon in chapter 4, the different economic strategies in Noord-Brabant all have different durations and posed endings. With the focus on cooperation, including between the regions, it may be of value to coordinate these durations into one duration for all involved strategies for a more seamless and cooperative reason. This testifies of cooperation between all regions and may make it easier for businesses that operate on the provincial scale to find alignment in the entire province. This also coincides with one of the recommendations of the AWTI (2020) in which they argue for an encompassing and inspiring future image, so all involved parties know what to work towards and to streamline ambitions on a regional and national level. According to the AWTI, this offers regions more grip long-term and helps them to build policies, develop agendas, and set up meaningful initiatives.

One final thought to finish this thesis with was the drastic idea of one of the respondents, more specifically the respondent of Stimulus. He indicated that the Netherlands suffers from a certain ailment in which every organization is required to have its own strategy, agenda, and notes. This bureaucratic way of operating subtracts a lot of valuable time in which concrete action could be done working towards societal missions and transitions. Having organizations that operate on a provincial scale make policy in the form of strategy, agendas, and notes solely, regional development organizations have more time and means to handle the execution. This would accelerate the tackling of SGDs, societal missions, and transitions as argued for by mission-driven policy. This would centralize policymaking. This suggestion was further supported by the respondent of REWIN, who indicated the sheer number of notes in West-Brabant alone. This suggestion would require a complete overhaul in the financing structure, would require further research to test its feasibility, and can be considered food for thought, but it has the possibility to change the game.

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## Appendices