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**TARGETED ANALYSIS //**

## **URDICO**

Urban Dimension of Cohesion Policy  
and other EU Programmes

Annex 4.5\_Rotterdam Case Study Report // January 2026



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This document is a final report.

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The final version of the report will be published as soon as approved.



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## Abbreviations

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
BoTu	Bospolder-Tussendijken
BNC	Interdepartmental Working Group for the Assessment of New Commission Proposals
BZK	Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations
CLLD	Community-led Local Development
CP	Cohesion Policy
CPR	Common Provision Regulation
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
G4	Big 4 cities
IB	Intermediate Body
IBW	Inter-administrative working group
IPO	Inter Provincial Consultation
ITI	Integrated Territorial Investment
JTF	Just Transition Fund
LOOP	National Consultation on Operational Programmes
MA	Managing Authority
MFF	Multi-annual Financial Framework
OP	Operational Programme
PMO	Project Management Office
PO	Policy Objective
PRZ	National Programme Rotterdam South
RAEF	Regional Coordination meeting on EU Funds
RIS	Regional innovation strategy
RRP	Reform and Resilience Fund
SAG	Urban Advisory Group
SIFR	Social Impact Fund Rotterdam
STEP	Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform
SUD	Sustainable Urban Development
TO	Thematic Objective
UVW	Dutch Water Authorities
VNG	Association of Dutch Municipalities
Wbi	Housing Stimulus package

# 1 Summary

The URDICO case study on the city of Rotterdam explores the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy and EU programmes, with a particular focus on how these policies are implemented and adapted at the local level. Rotterdam is the second largest city in the Netherlands, situated in the province of South Holland, and plays a critical role in the national economy as the site of Europe's largest seaport. Despite its economic significance, Rotterdam faces persistent socio-economic disparities, particularly in the southern part of the city, where challenges such as unemployment, low education levels, and poor housing conditions are concentrated.

Rotterdam is notable within the Netherlands and Europe for being the Managing Authority (MA) of the regional ERDF West Netherlands programme (Kansen voor West in Dutch). This role is exceptional among EU cities and provides Rotterdam with significant influence over programme design and implementation. The city is also an Intermediate Body (IB) for the Just Transition Fund (JTF) for the IJmond and Rijnmond regions. These roles place Rotterdam at the heart of EU Cohesion Policy governance in the western Netherlands and reflect its long-standing involvement in EU funding initiatives. The city has historically concentrated its Cohesion Policy efforts on Rotterdam South, an area also targeted by the National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRZ), a long-term investment strategy supported by national and municipal actors.

The governance structure in Rotterdam is multi-layered and includes elected neighbourhood councils and specialised clusters within the municipal administration that deal separately with the social and physical domains. The integration of EU policy at the city level is facilitated by a dedicated strategy department, two project offices (social and physical), and a coordinated EU affairs unit. The city has developed a robust institutional capacity to manage EU funds, apply for direct and shared management funding, and ensure alignment between municipal priorities and European policy frameworks. Nevertheless, the impact of EU funding remains financially modest, representing around 0.3% of the municipal budget, though this support is strategically significant for specific urban transitions.

Rotterdam has also introduced several notable innovations. The urban CLLD in Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) gives residents direct control over project selection and governance, marking a shift from top-down interventions to community-led development. The Social Impact Fund Rotterdam (SIFR) supports social entrepreneurship with a revolving fund mechanism, enhancing the long-term impact of EU investments. Meanwhile, the project offices play a crucial role in identifying funding opportunities, preparing applications, and managing implementation and compliance procedures.

The experience of the 2014–2020 programming period revealed difficulties in integrating ERDF and ESF within the SUD ITI, due to differing regulatory frameworks and administrative procedures. This integration was abandoned in the 2021–2027 period, which several city actors regretted, citing the benefits of coordinated approaches to employment and social issues. At the same time, Rotterdam also participates very successfully in programmes such as Interreg, Horizon, LIFE, and the European Urban Initiative (EUI). These projects have addressed diverse challenges from climate adaptation and innovation to mobility and social inclusion.

The city's engagement in EU networks such as Eurocities, ICLEI, and the Resilient Cities Network has strengthened its lobbying capacity and policy learning. Rotterdam has developed its own EU strategy, supported by a Brussels office and internal coordination across departments. It also contributes actively to national debates on the future of Cohesion Policy through bodies like the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG).

Despite its achievements, Rotterdam faces several challenges. The fragmentation of EU Cohesion Policy programmes, administrative complexity, and thematic concentration requirements reduce flexibility in project design. The city's limited role in the Netherlands' Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) highlighted the continued tendency of national ministries to centralise new EU programmes resulting in a lack of visibility of EU contributions at the local level.

In terms of policy alignment, local planning instruments such as the Environmental Vision, the Coalition Agreement and the NPRZ are generally consistent with the objectives of Cohesion Policy. The Environmental Vision sets out long-term goals for sustainable urban development, while the Coalition Agreement defines priorities across social, economic, and environmental domains. In South Rotterdam, the NPRZ and the Urban Implementation plan aim to address entrenched inequalities through targeted investment in education, employment, housing, and green transition. These strategies align closely with EU policy objectives, particularly in promoting social inclusion, employment, and sustainable development.

Rotterdam's experience demonstrates that urban authorities can play a central role in managing and localising Cohesion Policy, provided they have the institutional capacity and political support to do so. While the volume of EU funding may be limited, its strategic use—combined with strong governance, innovation, and network participation—can deliver meaningful change in urban environments. To further this potential, the city recommends improved thematic integration across EU funds, broader use of flexible governance tools like CLLD, and stronger EU commitment to the subsidiarity and partnership principles. These steps would not only enhance the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy but also bring Europe closer to its citizens in a tangible and impactful way.

## 2 Introduction

The case study looks at the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Rotterdam is the second largest city of the Netherlands, after the capital Amsterdam, with around 670 thousand inhabitants. The city is situated in the province of South-Holland in the western part of the country. Rotterdam is a major logistic and economic centre and has Europe's largest seaport. Nevertheless, the city faces persistent economic challenges with higher unemployment than the national average, and important differences among certain neighbourhoods.

The territorial scope of the research focusses on the entire municipality and the more territorially limited Integrated Territorial Investment strategy (SUD ITI). At the level of the municipality the city has an elected college and is governed by an executive consisting of a Mayor and Alderman. For statistical purposes the city is divided into 22 districts and 92 neighbourhoods. The administrative division consists of 37 district councils and 2 village councils. Following the Environmental Act that recently went into force, Rotterdam has an Environmental Vision for the city that covers priorities for the physical living environment.

Rotterdam was one of the first cities to receive dedicated Cohesion Policy funding (i.e. article 10 Urban Pilot Project) awarded in 1990. Ever since the city has consistently focussed this support on neighbourhoods experiencing multiple challenges. Starting in the 2014-2020 period this part of the city is covered by an SUD ITI and is therefore a separate focus of this case study.

A main feature is that the city of Rotterdam is the Managing Authority of the West Netherlands ERDF programme. In the 2021-2027 programme the city is also the Intermediate Body for the JTF IJmond and Rijnmond plans. Rotterdam is part of a more developed region where many responsibilities and associated operational budgets are decentralised to cities. This means that Cohesion Policy support is relatively limited. Related to an approximate annual investment budget for the city of 400 million euros, the EU funds make up about 2,5%. Being in a more developed region also goes with a strong thematic concentration requirement which means that the ERDF programme has a strong focus on innovation.

The next chapters will explore in more detail the organisation of Cohesion Policy in the Netherlands and the role cities play in this setup, the city of Rotterdam in particular. The case study will also look at the characteristics of the city's strategies and the efforts the city employs to network and lobby to have its voice heard. Chapter 5 will address challenges that the city encountered in attracting and managing EU funding, and innovative approaches it developed. In chapter 6 the case study will zoom in on the Cohesion Policy contributions to Rotterdam's long-term agendas both at the level of the city and the level of the SUD ITI. Chapter 7 analyses the type of EU funding and projects the city benefits from and how the city organisation might have contributed to this. A specific chapter is dedicated to the Reform and Resilience Fund (RRF) and the report closes with a chapter on the observed challenges and recommendations.

### 3 National Overview on Cohesion Policy

To understand the national context in which Rotterdam operates this chapter will explore the implementation of Cohesion Policy in the Netherlands. The analysis looks both at the 2014-2020 period and the 2021-2027 period. It will zoom in on how responsibilities for delivering CP are organized, whether political considerations can be identified in the national regulation of Cohesion Policy, the form and share of decentralized planning and implementation of Cohesion Policy, and how the urban dimension of Cohesion Policy is delivered.

#### **Organisation of CP responsibilities in the Netherlands among institutions and territorial levels**

The Netherlands is a developed country in the Northwest of Europe. It is very densely populated, especially in the western part of the Netherlands. This part of the country is historically called 'Holland'. The Netherlands is normally characterised as a decentralised unitary state. The country has a two-tier subnational system of governance comprising 12 provinces at regional level and 335 municipalities at the local level.

According to the constitution and specific municipal legislation, local governments have the legal right to make independent decisions on all matters concerning their territory. However, in practice, governance is often shared among various administrative levels, reinforcing the role of municipalities as key partners of the national government in implementing an expanding scope of public policies. At the local level, authorities are responsible for managing social welfare distribution, offering social assistance, and providing services for youth. They are also in charge of urban planning, transportation development, and maintaining essential local infrastructure, including public buildings, libraries, and waste management.

In larger urban areas like Rotterdam, district councils act as representatives of city neighborhoods in municipal consultations and engagement efforts, although they lack formal decision-making powers. Municipal revenue primarily comes from local taxes—such as property tax, waste disposal charges, and sewage fees—alongside municipal income and transfers from the national Municipal Fund (Gemeentefonds) which are national transfers from the state to municipalities.

Since the decentralisation reforms of the early 2010s, the responsibilities of municipalities have significantly expanded, with many public services being reassigned from national to local administration. Despite this, the Netherlands (alongside Ireland) remains one of the few EU countries where local governments are still highly reliant on the national state. Dutch municipalities are required to maintain balanced budgets, cannot engage in significant financial risks, and largely depend on national funding, which restricts their financial independence and limits their capacity to pursue their own initiatives—unlike cities in other EU member states that enjoy more fiscal autonomy<sup>1</sup>.

The Netherlands has no Cohesion Fund. In the 2014-2020 period there were four regional ERDF programmes and one national ESF programme. This has been complemented by one Just Transition Fund programme in the 2021-2027 period.

In both periods the overall coordination of cohesion policy has been in the hands of the Ministry of Economic Affairs. This ministry organizes cross-fund meetings (fondsoverschrijdend overleg).

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<sup>1</sup> Interview Urban Envoy, 30 April 2025

Here all CPR funds are present and discussion topics which should be relevant to all funds (e.g. how to jointly interpret new regulations).

For both the ESF and the JTF, the Ministry of Social affairs and Employment is the Managing Authority. ESF is managed at the national level but uses 35 so-called labour market regions to deliver the projects locally, each consisting of groups of municipalities.

The Dutch JTF funds' employment activities and economic actions are the responsibility of two different national ministries; Social affairs and Employment, and Economic Affairs and Climate respectively. In addition, provinces and municipalities also have competencies in this field. That makes for a complex governance picture. While the Social affairs and Employment ministry is the Managing Authority, the regions where the JTF plans are situated are Intermediate Bodies.

The Netherlands has four regional ERDF programmes, separating the country into four (West, South, East and North) with each area corresponding to the boundaries of 2-4 provinces.

The West Netherlands ERDF programme was called 'Kansen voor West II' (West Netherlands II) in the 2014-2020 period and 'Kansen voor West III' (West Netherlands III) in the 2021-2027. The ERDF West Netherlands programme consists of 8 partners, the four western provinces – South-Holland, North-Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland - and the four biggest cities in these provinces: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague.

The city of Rotterdam is the Managing Authority of the ERDF West Netherlands. This is unique in the Netherlands and very rare in Europe in general. This role stems indirectly from the Dutch EURO G9 programme, which was a Dutch ERDF programme for 9 cities in the period 2000-2006. At that time ERDF in more developed countries was limited to 15% of the population. However, the ERDF regulation included a new category 'urban areas in difficulty'. This provision was utilized by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to set up the EURO-G9 programme. The West Netherlands programme was established in the period that followed. The fact that Rotterdam is the MA for this programme and that the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has a representative on the Monitoring Committee are remnants of this<sup>2</sup>. The Ministry of Economic Affairs has voting rights in the Monitoring Committee, the Ministry of Finance is an advisory member as audit authority.

### **Political considerations in the national regulation of Cohesion Policy**

The Netherlands is a net contributor to the budget of the European Union. The return the country receives in CP funding is very low in comparison to overall public spending: only 0.59% of public investment in the 2014-2020 period come from CP.

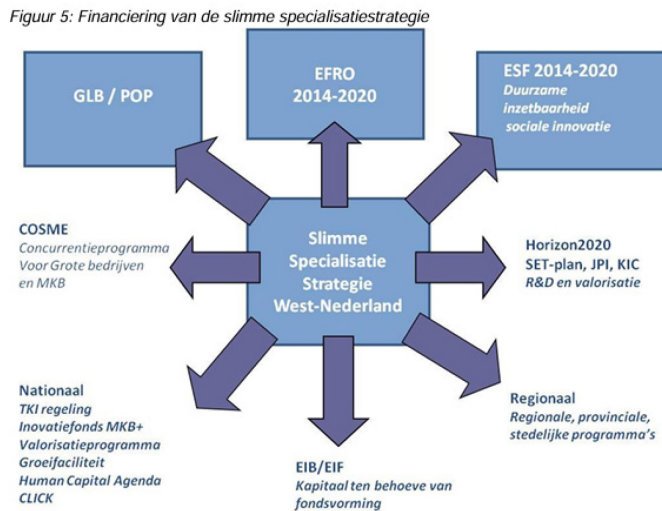
Both due to thematic concentration requirements in CP for more developed regions and a will to concentrate funding, the CP funding is strongly focused on business support for innovation, the green transition, social inclusion, employment and training. Regional innovation strategies (RIS) are the basis of the regional ERDF strategies. RIS3 West-Netherlands is the innovation strategy at the heart of the West Netherlands II programme. A key concept in this RIS3 are the top-sectors, sectors of the regional economy that are considered strategic and are a focus of support. These align closely with the European Commission defined STEP sectors.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview head of MA West Netherlands, 12 May 2025

The diagram below shows that there are different funding sources for the RIS3 strategy: European, national and regional.

**Figure 3.1**  
**Financing of smart specialization strategy in West Netherlands**



Source: Province of North Holland, et al. (2014)

The only explicit role for cities in cohesion policy is for the 4 biggest cities of the Netherlands, also known as the G4 cities. They are all situated in the West Netherlands programme area. The G4 have a history as big cities with special big-city problems that make them unique in the Netherlands. ERDF projects in the G4 address the mismatch at the labour market between skills needed and available workforce. To fulfil the urban earmarking required in ERDF at national level (5% in the 14-20 period and 8% in the 21-27 period), it was decided that the West Netherlands programme would dedicate 25% to sustainable urban development.

The underlying rationale for cohesion policy in the Netherlands has not changed between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 programming periods. In the former period this meant an overall focus for the ERDF programmes on Thematic Objective (TO)1 'innovation' and TO4 'low-carbon economy'. In the West Netherlands II programme TO8 – Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility; and TO9 – Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination, are added specifically for the urban partners. However, to respect the mandatory thematic concentration of 80% on TO1 and TO4, the SUD ITIs also integrate TO1 and TO4 on innovation and low-carbon economy if this fits in their urban plan. In the ITI area of the city of Rotterdam the specific priorities are:

- Developing (demand based) future labour supply (8b ERDF)
- Improve conditions for establishing a business (9b ERDF)
- Reducing energy consumption in the built environment (innovation, employment and training) (4c ERDF)
- Match unemployed job seekers to available jobs (ESF art. 8)

In the 2021-2027 programming period the Dutch ERDF programmes use Policy Objective (PO) 1 'Smart Europe' and PO2 Green Europe. In the West Netherlands III programme PO5 'A Europe closer to citizens' is available for the four cities. Again, the thematic concentration rule for more developed regions mandates an 80 % focus on PO1 and PO2 with the result that the Rotterdam ITI not only includes PO5, but also PO2. Although the wording of the Cohesion Policy objectives changes, the city's objective for the ITI area remain the same: bridge the gap between qualifications of inhabitants and employment on offer, or in other words, address the mismatch in the labour market. This approach of the city of Rotterdam is laid out in Rotterdam's ERDF Urban Implementation Plan.

## Form and share of decentralized planning and implementation of CP in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands ERDF is implemented through 4 regional programmes, ESF through one national programme. This means that in principle 100% of ERDF is regionalised. The ratio ERDF – ESF is exactly 50-50, so also 50% of total cohesion policy funding is regionalised from a management perspective. Within ESF substantial parts of the funding allocation are also regionalized in the sense that labour market regions can decide on activities and target beneficiaries. So in practical terms, much more than 50% of CP funding focus is decided by regions and cities.

The Netherlands has three levels of urban involvement in cohesion policy:

- Rotterdam as the managing authority for the ERDF West Netherlands programme
- Utrecht, The Hague and Amsterdam with their own ITIs in this ERDF programme
- Other cities with more limited involvement

These four major cities are more actively involved in the future and implementation of cohesion policy. They have a seat in the Monitoring Committee of the West Netherlands programme, bring in cofinancing and each have an Urban Implementation Plan for their sustainable urban development investments. The maximum amount provided by the state is agreed in a 'Uitvoeringsregeling EFRO' or Executive Rule ERDF. The parts provided by the provinces and cities are agreed in the 'Covenant of Kansen voor West partners'. In addition, one medium sized city also takes part in the West Netherlands Monitoring Committee, currently that is the city of Delft.

Outside the West Netherlands programme, only Groningen is also involved in their ERDF programme Monitoring Committee, but without being an Article 11 city. Eindhoven and Groningen are active in programmes such as Urban Innovative Actions and Interreg.

In the Netherlands there is an **Association of Dutch Municipalities** (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten – VNG). The VNG is an interest group and knowledge platform for all Dutch municipalities. It represents the interests of municipalities with various parties and supports them in translating national policy into municipal policy. In particular the VNG advocates for the interests of municipalities and their residents with the government, Europe and other organisations, such as political parties and trade unions. It offers a platform for municipalities to exchange experiences and share knowledge about implementation practices and current developments and it advises municipalities in all kinds of areas, such as sustainability, safety and innovation. The VNG also provides support with all kinds of tasks, such as drawing up policy plans, implementing laws and organising events and it develops products and services that municipalities can use in their work, such as guidelines, templates and software. Finally, the VNG promotes collaboration between municipalities and other parties, for example within regions or between different departments of the government and carries out international projects, in which it uses the knowledge and experience of Dutch municipalities.

In April 2024 the VNG produced a position paper on Cohesion Policy post-2027 that represents the vision of Dutch municipalities. The main points are that Dutch municipalities would like more emphasis on the themes green, digital and social. The call for stronger coordination between CAP and regional policy, a continued focused approach on SUD, and a strong Interreg programme. In addition, municipalities need the following within the future cohesion policy in order to achieve the greatest possible impact at local level:

1. Funding: to further develop regional and local competitiveness and innovation capacity, it is important to continue and, where possible, strengthen the structural fund programmes in the Netherlands.

2. Governance: it is important that the implementation of cohesion policy remains decentralised, with more room for regional and local opportunities and customisation and a central role for the partnership principle.

3. Continuity and coherence: fragmentation of existing funds must be prevented. There must be better coordination between funds and the possibility of combining funds must be provided. Administrative burdens must not contribute to fragmentation. Furthermore, cohesion policy should not be used as a crisis instrument.

4. Regulatory space: a reduction in administrative burdens and control pressure is needed to provide scope for improving the accessibility and efficiency of programmes.<sup>5</sup>

An important portal for information sharing regarding European policy is **Kenniscentrum Europa Decentraal (KED)**. This knowledge centre was founded in 2002 by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), the Interprovinciaal Overleg (IPO) and the Dutch Water Authorities (UVW). It is unique among providers of information on European law and policy because it specialises in issues relevant for local and regional authorities, providing information on European legislation, case law and the transposition into Dutch legislation. Kenniscentrum Europa Decentraal keeps Dutch local and regional government employees informed about European issues, such as state aid, public procurement, the environment, digital policies, employment and social policy, mobility and the freedom of movement.

A key component of their services is the website, providing a source of European news and useful information for employees of local and regional governments. In addition, KED can be reached through a helpdesk for questions, they produce a weekly newsletter and they give presentations and organize events on topics that are relevant to local and regional government employees.

### Urban Envoy

The Netherlands has also a person in the position of Urban Envoy. The role of Urban Envoy was created in 2015, in the run-up to the Dutch EU Presidency in 2016. The aim was to draw more attention to urban issues in Europe, given the urbanisation in the Netherlands.

The mandate of the Urban Envoy is unique in Europe. The Urban Envoy can represent both the national government and cities, and in this sense the position is a form of “multi-level governance” in itself. The main objective is to strengthen the role and position of cities in the EU.

Originally, the focus was on sustainable urban development and the Urban Agenda for the EU, which was one of the main priorities of the Dutch EU Presidency.

- Since 2022, the mandate has had three pillars:
  - Sustainable urban development
  - Intergovernmental cooperation at European level
  - Cities and transitions

One of the achievements of the Urban Envoy is to establish a strong Intergovernmental cooperation on EU cohesion policy in the Netherlands. In practice, this was achieved through a strong role of municipalities in the **Interdepartmental Working Group for the Assessment of New Commission Proposals (BNC in Dutch)**. The Urban Envoy is part of this group, representing the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK). This group prepares common Dutch positions

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<sup>5</sup> Association of Dutch Municipalities (2017)

towards new Commission Proposals. They do this by preparing BNC fiches (Assessments of New Commission proposals) and sharing instructions for council working groups. The BNC is interdepartmental and intergovernmental:

- Those involved include the ministries for Economic Affairs, Finance, External Affairs, and Education, Culture and Science
- Other umbrella authorities such as Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), Inter Provincial Consultation (IPO) and the Dutch Water Authorities (UVW) also participate
- MAs are also involved in all relevant matters. Rotterdam, being a Managing Authority is for example also involved in the consultations for the Council Working Group on Structural Measures and Outermost Regions, which is the Council Working Group dealing with cohesion policy.

In the framework of this intergovernmental cooperation a joint “Vision Paper Cohesion Policy post-27” has been developed and formally adopted by the national government. This has been drawn up inter-administratively and interdepartmentally and focuses on the new programme period (MFF). The paper was presented to the European Commission in October 2024.

The Vision Paper does not contain any position on the distribution of resources, but focuses on priorities, direction and important points for attention, very much in line with the position paper of the VNG. These position papers are being used as a starting point for the Dutch position in the preparation of the upcoming regulations and used as a basis for parliamentary debates, letters and annotated agendas. Following the Vision Paper, a technical paper was drawn up on topics such as performance-based working and simplified cost options<sup>4</sup>.

### **Delivery of urban dimension of Cohesion Policy in the Netherlands**

In both periods the sustainable urban development earmarking in the ERDF (5% and 8% in the respective periods) is taken care of by the 4 big cities (G4) present in the Kansen voor West programme. This is therefore the only ERDF programme in the Netherlands with an article 7/article 11 component. The G4 have a history as big cities with particular big-city problems that make them unique in the Netherlands. These relate mostly to the socio-economic characteristics of their inhabitants, mostly concentrated in certain neighbourhoods; these include higher poverty rates, higher unemployment, lower educational attainment levels, poorer housing conditions, higher crime rates.

Because of the small amounts of funding available, the three other regional ERDF programmes requested the West Netherlands programme to take care of the national sustainable urban development requirement.

In the 2014-2020 period, 9% of the total national ERDF envelope is dedicated to sustainable urban development in the G4 cities of the West Netherlands II programme. Therefore, each G4 city had its own ITI. The ERDF allocation for the SUD ITIs was complemented by 5% of the national ESF allocation. A small amount of ERDF is used for an urban CLLD in the city of The Hague.

In actual amounts this is €507 million ERDF funding for the 4 regional ERDF programmes. Of this, €189 million is for the West Netherlands programme. Within this programme, the ERDF amount

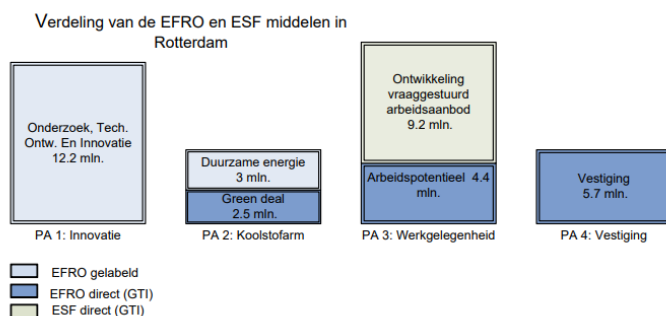
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<sup>4</sup> Interview Urban Envoy, 30 April 2025

is earmarked for investments in the territories of the 8 partners (4 provinces and 4 cities). The amount reserved for the cities is based on the number of inhabitants in 2012. This earmarked amount does not go entirely to SUD ITIs. A substantial part of these earmarked funds the cities can invest in sub-regional strategies together with other programme partners. Each partner, the cities included, will have to partly match these EU contributions with their own cofinancing. Other parts of the cofinancing come from the state and project partners. How these funds are earmarked for the partners is written in West Netherlands covenants. There exists a covenant for the 2014-2020 period, an addendum for the additional React EU funds, and a covenant for the 2021-2027 period.

**Figure 3.2**

### Distribution of ERDF and ESF resources in Rotterdam 2014-2020 period



Source: Municipality of Rotterdam (2018)

This bar chart shows the parts of the Rotterdam allocation, including ESF, that went to the SUD ITI; dark blue for ERDF and beige for ESF. The light blue parts were reserved for projects outside of the scope of the ITI. Notably, the Thematic Objective on research and innovation is entirely spend outside of the SUD ITI. Typically, the West Netherlands programme supports innovation ecosystems in the region, where support goes to businesses, research institutions and educational centres.

The budget of the Rotterdam ITI was extended with a little around 5.3 million euro following the allocation of REACT-EU resources in 2021. Rotterdam's budget for sub-regional strategies increased with 6.6 million euros.

In the 2021-2027 period the principles have stayed the same, with the exception that ESF+ is no longer part of the SUD ITIs. The earmarked ERDF funding for Rotterdam decreased a little with a total of 12 million for the SUD ITI and another 12 million for sub-regional strategies.

Rotterdam's EU coordinator for the social development cluster explained that the ESF's involvement in the ITI had important advantages: Joint appreciation of employment issues, learning process in joint advisory committees. The substantive synergy remains, despite the discontinuation of the linking of resources within the ITI, where the synergy still had to prove itself at project level.

However, there were also significant challenges, such as different regimes and steering policy departments, and initial communication problems between ERDF and ESF experts. It was difficult to achieve synergy at project level in the first programme period and therefore difficult to communicate the success of this approach.<sup>5</sup> The main elements of the ITI approach have now been adopted in the JTF:

<sup>5</sup> Interview EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

- The JTF can finance both business investments and training.
- Governance: The Ministry of Social Affairs, Policy Implementation Service is the MA, as with ESF, however the MA West Netherlands is the intermediate implementing body. The JTF advisory committee also includes representatives with ERDF and ESF backgrounds.
- The JTF can make use of simplified cost options that are foreseen in the ERDF and ESF regulations.

## 4 Urban structure and governance of Cohesion Policy

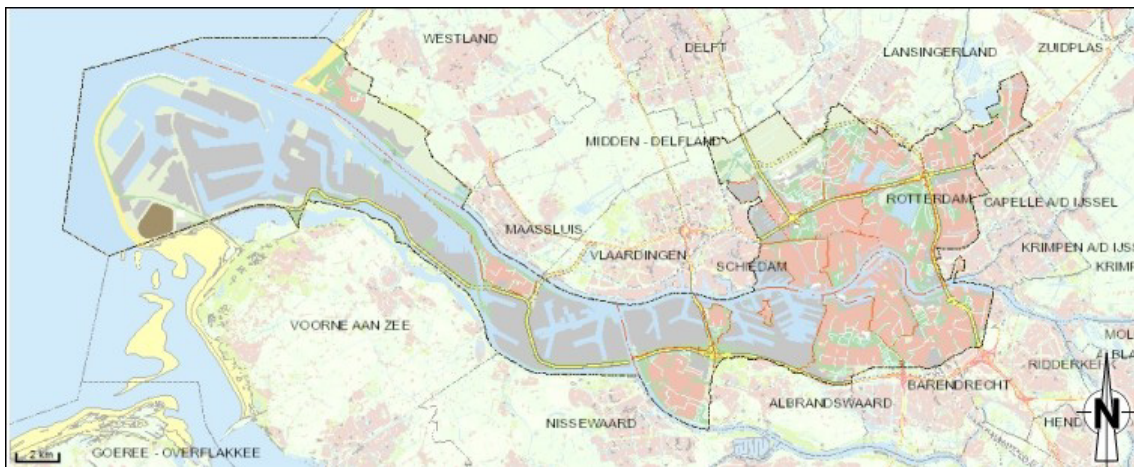
This section provides a comprehensive understanding of the administrative configuration, including spatial boundaries based on various territorial classifications (such as urban areas, metropolitan regions, cross-border zones, and internal subdivisions). It also covers the governance model(s) in place, and the mechanisms governing the relationships between different levels and sectors and the institutional mapping of relevant actors.

### 4.1 Spatial boundaries and administrative configuration

The spatial boundaries are limited to the municipality of Rotterdam, which includes also the port of Rotterdam. In terms of surface area, Rotterdam is the largest city in the Netherlands, covering 319.4 km<sup>2</sup>. However, about one third of the surface area is water. The municipality of Rotterdam has 672,330 inhabitants in 2025, which makes it the second largest municipality in the Netherlands, after Amsterdam.

The municipality of Rotterdam is a municipality in the province of South Holland. For statistical purposes the municipality is subdivided into 9 residential areas, 22 districts and 92 neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup> The administrative division consists of 37 district councils and 2 village councils<sup>7</sup>.

**Map 4.1**  
Municipal boundaries of Rotterdam



Source: <https://www.gis.rotterdam.nl/>

The second scope of analysis is defined by the ITI zone, which includes only a portion of the city. This SUD ITI area corresponds to the section of Rotterdam located south of the River Meuse (refer to the map below). This region generally underperforms compared to the city average in terms of socioeconomic metrics like income, education, employment, reliance on unemployment benefits,

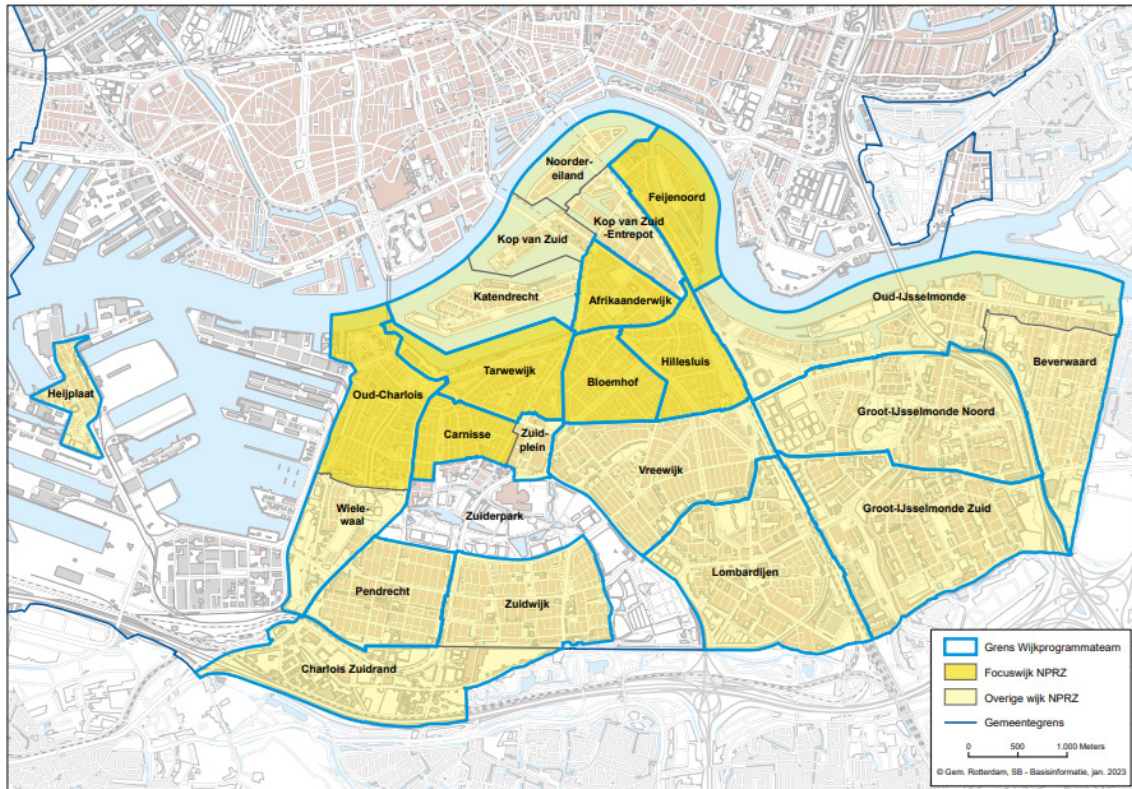
<sup>6</sup> <https://allecijfers.nl/gemeente/rotterdam/>

<sup>7</sup> [www.rotterdam.nl/wijkraden](http://www.rotterdam.nl/wijkraden)

and property values. The area is divided into 7 focus neighbourhoods (marked in dark yellow) and the broader southern part of Rotterdam (shown in light yellow on the map). In 2024 the number of inhabitants of the entire Rotterdam South area is 207.510, while the number in the 7 focus neighbourhoods is 80.290<sup>8</sup>

### Map 4.2

#### Boundaries of the NPRZ area and SUD ITI in the 2014-2020 period



Source: National Programme Rotterdam South (2023), p61

The socio-economic situation of Rotterdam-South (Charlois, Feijenoord, IJsselmonde districts) can be traced back to the development in the late 19th century with the expansion of the port, attracting many workers and leading to the rapid construction of affordable housing. After World War II, new garden cities were built to address the housing shortage. In the 1960s–70s, guest workers from southern countries settled in Rotterdam-South to fill low-wage jobs in the port. However, from the 1980s, port activities shifted westward, reducing local employment. At the same time, nearby municipalities were developed with more appealing housing, prompting wealthier residents to leave Rotterdam-South.

The ITI area overlaps with the National Programme Rotterdam-South (NPRZ in Dutch). In 2010, facing severe and unique socio-economic challenges in Rotterdam South, the then Minister for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration, tasked the former minister Wim Deetman and the former mayor of Enschede Jan Mans with proposing solutions. Their 2011 report, *Kwaliteitsprong*

<sup>8</sup> National Programme Rotterdam South (2023)

Zuid, emphasized the need for a united effort involving the municipality, national government, residents, schools, businesses, and housing associations. They called for a long-term National Programme that could deliver real change through shared vision, local engagement, and decisive action, stressing the active role of residents and entrepreneurs. These recommendations led to the launch of the National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRZ) in late 2011, designed to run over 20 years with the goal of bringing South Rotterdam in line with the rest of the city and the G4 cities.

### Changes in the spatial boundaries of the case study

The spatial boundaries of the city have stayed the same. The boundaries of the ITI have slightly changed from 2014-2020 to 2021-2027 programming periods. It again covers the NPRZ area of Rotterdam-South but adds two neighbourhoods with similar socio-economic characteristics on the north bank of the river Meuse; Bospolder-Tussendijken, Oud-Mathenesse/Witte Dorp and Merwe-vierhaven. In addition, both areas have a local development strategy that can guide project selection. The map below shows this new additional in a schematic way.

#### Map 4.3

#### Boundary of the SUD ITI in the 2021-2027 period



Source: MA West Netherlands presentation 26 April 2023

### Roles and responsibilities distributed across the various administrative levels

Because the strategies under review are at or below municipal level, the city level is the main actor. However, the Dutch national government has a framework-setting and supervisory role in relation to municipalities. The central government sets national policy, laws and regulations, and the municipalities are responsible for implementing them within their boundaries. The central government also has supervisory tasks to check whether municipalities comply with the law. The national government provides an important part of the city budget and in the Netherlands the national government appoints the mayor.

In the city the elected city council takes decisions, and the college of mayor and vice-mayors is the responsible for the day-to-day management of the city. A college Agreement is the political document that sets out the course of action during their governing mandate.

Since 2022 Rotterdam has neighbourhood and village councils. These serve as a link between residents and the municipality, representing local interests and raising concerns such as green spaces, welfare, safety, and accessibility. These councils encourage community involvement by inviting

residents, organisations, and entrepreneurs to share ideas and participate in local decision-making. Neighbourhoods can have neighbourhood plans.

There are 37 neighbourhood councils and two village councils, with Hoek van Holland and Rozenburg having the latter. Councils are elected every four years and act as key partners in fostering cooperation between the neighbourhood and municipal authorities, ensuring that local voices are heard and considered.<sup>9</sup>

Each neighbourhood also has a neighbourhood manager. A neighbourhood manager is responsible for the strategic policy of the municipality of Rotterdam in a specific neighbourhood. An interviewed neighbourhood manager described his role as a “boundary spanner” between two worlds: the living environment of the neighbourhood and the system world of the municipality of Rotterdam.

Tasks include bringing together municipal departments working in the neighbourhood, coordinating municipal projects and policy with the wishes and needs of residents, and bringing important issues for residents to the attention of the municipality. He works with a networker who is the public face of the neighbourhood and maintains contacts in the neighbourhood.<sup>10</sup>

Within the city administration there are different clusters, at a lower level there are Directorates, units and teams. These clusters are:

- Directorate for Executive Affairs (in Dutch Bestuurszaken - BZ)  
Supports the mayor and aldermen in managing the city. This includes policy preparation, strategic advice and monitoring the implementation of decisions.
- Administrative and Corporate Support (in Dutch Bestuurs- en Concernondersteuning - BCO)  
The hub of the organisation, ensuring the connection between the administration, the districts and the residents of Rotterdam. BCO also handles objections and appeals.
- Services (in Dutch Dienstverlening - DV)  
Ensures good services for citizens and businesses, including front office, information management, levies and civil affairs.
- Social Development (in Dutch Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling - MO)  
Focuses on improving the living environment and well-being of Rotterdam residents, including in the areas of education, care and welfare.
- Work & Income (in Dutch Werk en Inkomen - W&I)  
Supports Rotterdam residents in finding work and obtaining benefits, and encourages participation in the labour market.
- City Management (in Dutch Stadsbeheer - SB)  
Manages and maintains public spaces, such as roads, green spaces, sewerage and parking. Also handles matters relating to waste, events and cemeteries.

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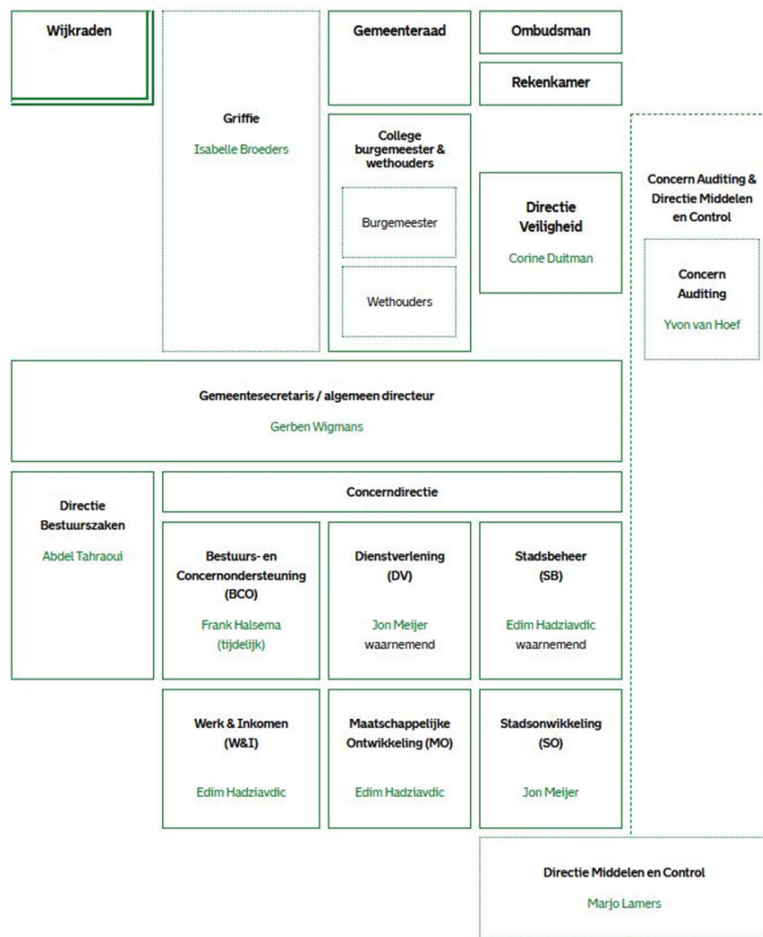
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rotterdam.nl/wijkraden>

<sup>10</sup> Interview Neighbourhood manager for Feijenoord, 14 May 2025

- Urban Development (in Dutch Stadsontwikkeling - SO)<sup>11</sup>  
 Responsible for the spatial development of the city, including housing, infrastructure and area development.

The organigram shown below, taken from the intranet website of the municipal administration, shows where the different clusters are situated. The directorate for Executive Affairs is directly under the responsibility of the Municipal Secretary. The municipal secretary is the highest civil servant and heads the municipal administration. He or she is also the chief advisor to the mayor and aldermen (the municipal executive) and acts as a link between the civil servants and the council. Decisions on the other 6 clusters are jointly taken by Group Management (Concerndirectie in Dutch). These directors are jointly responsible for the strategic policy and management of the municipal organisation.

**Figure 4.1**  
**Organigram Rotterdam municipality**



Source: Intranet Rotterdam municipality, June 2025

<sup>11</sup> Municipality of Rotterdam. (2023a)

Rotterdam-South benefits from the National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRZ). The governance of this programme was designed to include all major stakeholders, needed for the success of the approach. This not only includes public actors like the municipality and the state, but also key actors in the field of public housing, education, business, health, art & culture, safety and inhabitants. All these stakeholders, representing not only themselves but also their 'pillar' are represented in a steering committee that meets 6 times a year. The mayor of Rotterdam is the president of the steering committee and the public face of NPRZ.

Next to the steering committee there is a management office, which in 2023, consists of a director and 12 employees. They are either employed by the city or made available by one of the partners, like the state or the police.

Besides agreeing on priorities and actions of the programme, the partners also commit to financing. There is no preset budget for the long, 20 years, programme lifespan. Financing is in general secured in tranches and per action point. The majority of funding is provided by the city and the state in a 50:50 ratio. At the start of the programme in 2012 this amount was around 20 million yearly, currently the is around 85 million yearly investments.<sup>12</sup>

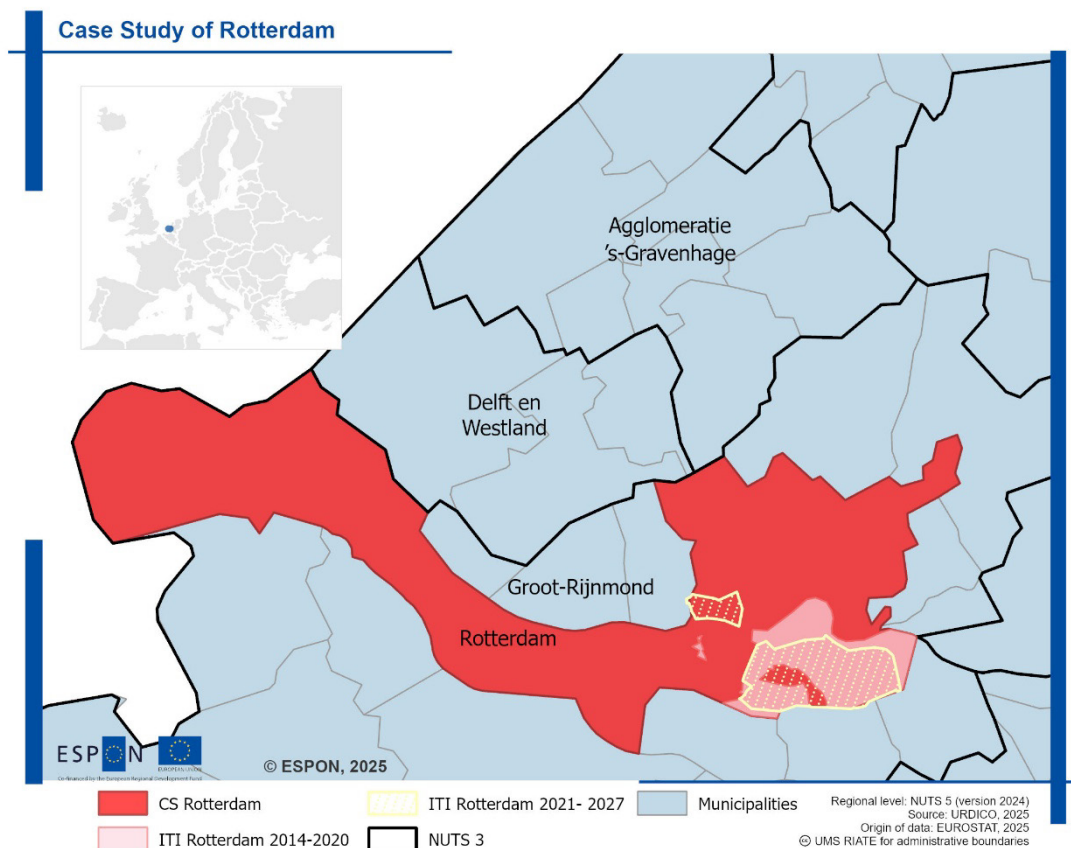
**Table 4.1**  
**Spatial boundary of Rotterdam' case study**

2014-2020		2021-2027	
Level	LAU(s)	Level	LAU(s)
city	NL_GM0599	city	NL_GM0599
ITI	CBS WK059910	ITI	CBS WK059910
	CBS WK059912		CBS WK059912
	CBS WK059915		CBS WK059915
	CBS BU05991593		CBS BU05990321
	CBS BU05992194		CBS BU05990322
			CBS BU05990327
	CBS BU05990328		CBS BU05991926

Source: author's own elaboration

<sup>12</sup> National Programme Rotterdam South (2023)

**Map 4.4**  
**Spatial boundaries of Rotterdam, the Netherlands**



Source: author's own elaboration

**Table 4.2**  
**Administrative configuration and responsibilities in Rotterdam**

Level	NUTS	Responsibility
National government	NUTSo	framework-setting and supervisory role. Provide financial support (gemeentefonds)
City administration clusters		
BCO	LAU2	Connection between city and districts
DV	LAU2	services for citizens
MO	LAU2	education, care and welfare
W&I	LAU2	Work and benefits
SB	LAU2	maintain public spaces
SO	LAU2	spatial development
neighbourhood councils	LAU3	ensure local voices are heard
National Programme Rotterdam South	Several LAU3 units	Manage the national programme for Rotterdam South

Source: author's own elaboration



## 4.2 Governance of Cohesion Policy in Rotterdam

This sub-chapter analyses the actors involved in delivering cohesion policy and territorial development governance and where they interact.

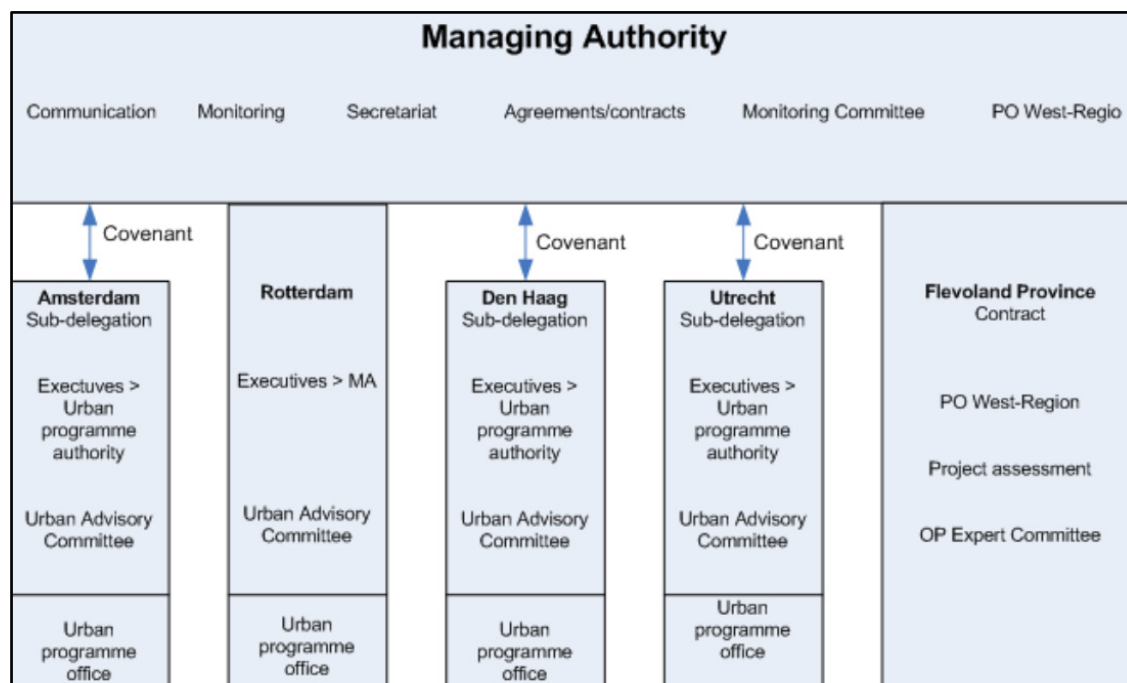
### Cohesion Policy governance in Rotterdam

In Rotterdam the main actors for delivering CP are the Managing Authority for the ERDF West Netherlands programme and its Rotterdam Programme Office, the Urban Advisory Group that advises on project selection and the city’s Executive that ultimately approves the ERDF Urban Implementation Plan for Rotterdam.

Rotterdam is in the unique position that the city itself is the Managing Authority of an ERDF regional programme. The overall coordination of the ERDF programmes is in the hands of the Ministry of Economy. As explained earlier, this West Netherlands programme has 8 partners (4 provinces and 4 cities). The four cities Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht receive a dedicated part of the budget. In the case of the city of Rotterdam, the city’s part of the programme is also managed by the MA and its Programme Office (which is the city).

An **urban advisory group** (SAG) has been set up in each of the four cities. This advisory group also includes members of the ERDF and ESF MAs (no voting rights). The urban advisory groups advise on the allocation of resources based on their specific knowledge of the programme area and the challenges in each of the cities. Based on this advice, the urban authorities decide for each of the 4 ITIs (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) on the use of funds and which projects will be allocated for ERDF. Schematically this is shown in the chart below:

**Figure 4.2**  
Organisational chart of the Dutch ITIs



Source: Hartkoorn, A. & Verdonk H., 4 ITI's in West Netherlands, presentation, 24 November 2015

In Rotterdam the urban advisory group consists of voting members and advisory members. The SAG is presided by a vice-Mayor of Rotterdam. Other voting members represent crucial stakeholder for the ITI such as a representative of education partners, SMEs from Rotterdam, businesses, knowledge institutes, the NPRZ programme and a neighbourhood representative. Advising members come from the ERDF and ESF authorities and municipal clusters relevant for the ITI. The SAG members are asked for suggestions for improvement with regard to applications and sub-projects.

For ESF, the Ministry of Social Affairs is the Managing Authority. Rotterdam is an applicant and distributor of ESF funds as the central municipality of the Rijnmond labour market region. The city applies for funds for all municipalities in the region, which are then distributed according to a fixed allocation formula. The municipality of Rotterdam also applies for ESF funds (Social Inclusion budget line) for schools in practical and special education in the Rijnmond labour market region. The municipalities have leeway in allocating the grant to the most pressing needs in their respective labour market region. ESF support in the municipality focuses on inclusion through education and employment, with investments to integrate excluded groups in-to the labour market. Tools supported are labour integration pathways, (re)-training, and individual coaching. The second focus is sustainable and quality employment with investments to help counter an expected shortage of labour. This is done through supporting measures for active and healthy ageing of the workforce as well as the (re)organisation of work environments and working conditions in order to keep people longer in employment.

In the 2021-2027 period the Rotterdam ITI also makes use of the CLLD instrument in the newly included Bospolder-Tussendijken or BoTu neighbourhood. The objective of the CLLD in BoTu is to become the first resilient neighbourhood in Rotterdam by 2028, where residents can develop their talents and where the energy transition has been realized together with local initiatives and residents. In addition to the energy transition, the care transition, digitization and employment are the main pillars of the CLLD. This means that the CLLD is in line with both priority 2 and 5. A **Local Action Group (LAG)** from the neighbourhood is in charge of the decisions. They decide how the process is organized and which neighbourhood projects receive funding. The municipality facilitates the process.

### **Spatial Planning governance in Rotterdam**

In the Netherlands the Environment Act, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning, came into force on 1 January 2024. This Act replaces a large number of laws and regulations relating to the physical living environment, such as the Water Act, the Spatial Planning Act and the Environmental Management Act. The Act applies to all Dutch residents, organisations and businesses.

The Environment Act foresees several instruments, notably an Environment Vision and Environment Implementation Programmes. In the Netherlands, the same system (vision and implementation programmes) is applied within different levels of government (municipality, province, state). This creates a logic whereby layers of government complement each other and are more focused on the longer term – beyond political mandates. One example is air quality, where European limit values lead to mandatory actions at municipal level, but where scaling-up resources may come from the province or national government.

As part of the provisions of this Environment Act, Rotterdam has also prepared a Municipal Environment Vision. This Vision is adopted by municipal council, and the municipal executive adopts implementation policy (Environment Programmes) within that framework.

Because the Environmental Act has only recently come into force, a real Municipal Environment Programmes do not yet exist, but work is underway to develop these. At present, for example, there is a Green Agenda with a set of proposed measures.

Both the Environment Vision and the Environment Programmes are within the responsibility of the City Development Cluster of the administration, however not in the same directorate and unit. The Economy and Sustainability Directorate for the former and the Strategy Unit for the latter.

### **Interaction between Cohesion Policy and spatial planning policy.**

At the national level the Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning is not involved in the design or implementation of CP programmes in the Netherlands.

It is only at the level of the municipality that responsibilities converge at a general level with the city executive responsible for Environment Programmes that implement the Environment Vision and the urban parts of CP. However, within the executive, also these responsibilities are separated with alderman Simons responsible for CP and alderman Zeegers responsible for spatial planning. They are also from different political parties.

Within the administration, the Environment Vision is prepared in the Economy and Sustainability Directorate in the City Development Cluster of the administration. However, the environmental programme instrument, the project development team, the Managing Authority of the West Netherlands programme, including the SUD ITI, and Intermedia Body for JTF IJmond and Rijnmond plans are part of the Strategy Unit of the City Development Cluster. So, although the responsibility is in the same cluster, they are not within the same units.

From interviews follow that there is little direct interaction between the spatial planning and CP actors. That has mostly to do with the themes that are addressed in CP and in the Urban Implementation Plan: innovation, social inclusion and employment. In a discussion at the Rotterdam Policy Lab it was mentioned that in the last two programming periods, not a single ERDF project had the City Development cluster as beneficiary. The situation was very different in the West Netherlands I programme from 2007-2014 when physical regeneration was a focus of the programme. In general, this is not seen as a big problem by the city, although a stronger involvement of spatial planning actors could have made it easier to create the right conditions to support businesses that want to establish themselves in the SUD ITI focus area<sup>13</sup>. For example, by investing in needed physical infrastructure for small businesses.

The interviewed Neighbourhood manager pointed to tensions between the city-level Environment Vision and the reality of some poorer neighbourhoods that are the focus of the SUD ITI. One example of tension is the urban policy aimed at greening the outdoor space, while residents have a greater need for parking spaces due to parking problems. It is a challenge to translate the abstract environment vision into the reality of the local level.<sup>14</sup> The Local Action Group of the BoTu CLLD selects projects on the basis of the local Veerkrachtig BoTu 2028 strategy, in which climate adaptation and energy transition are important topics. Therefore, also local projects in these topics get supported in BoTu.

The head of the strategy unit underlined that it is not the Environment Vision directly to which EU projects (CP or other) can be linked but rather the (future) Environment Programmes that implement parts of the vision. Currently, at the level of the Green Agenda (perhaps a future green/blue

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<sup>13</sup> Rotterdam policy lab, 1 July 2025

<sup>14</sup> Interview Neighbourhood manager for Feijenoord, 14 May 2025

Environment Programme), a check is then made to see whether there are any matches with European funding opportunities. The Green Agenda was the reason for the European project LIFE Urban Adapt.

Because of the role the city can play in the design and management of the regional ERDF and JTF programme, it is through these programmes that links with municipal priorities can most easily be made. One example is shore power as part of a climate agenda and support from the ERDF.<sup>15</sup>

So even though there is no actor-based link between CP and spatial planning, spatial planning priorities in a broad sense are supported by CP and other EU programmes.

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<sup>15</sup> Interview Head of strategy unit, 11 June 2025

**Table 4.3**  
**Governance of Cohesion Policy in Rotterdam**

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility	
		Cohesion Policy	Spatial Planning
MA Rotterdam	City	x	
mayor and aldermen	City	x	x
Ministry of Economic Affairs	State	x	
Ministry of Social Affairs	State	x	
Ministry of Housing and Spatial Planning	State		x
City development cluster	City	x	x (only implementation instrument)
Urban Advisory Group	ITI	x	
Local Action Group	neighbourhood	x	
Neighbourhood manager	neighbourhood	x	

Source: author's own elaboration

### 4.3 Rotterdam's involvement in Cohesion Policy

Cities ask for better involvement in the Cohesion Policy's conceptualisation, management, and implementation. This section explores the actual participation of Rotterdam in delivering the Cohesion Policy (ERDF, ESF+, Cohesion Funds) for the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods, both in the design and the implementation phase.

#### 4.3.1 2014-2020 programming period

Rotterdam has always been active in the Association of Dutch Municipalities (Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten – VNG). In the preparation of the post 2014 CP period the association presented a position paper in February 2010 that highlighted the demands from local governments, with an active contribution from Rotterdam. Rotterdam also participated in the drafting of position papers from European networks, notably Eurocities and the Committee of the Regions.

In preparation of the 2014-2020 period Rotterdam met regularly in the so-called IBW (inter-administrative working group) Future Cohesion Policy, consisting of national level civil servants and representatives of provinces and municipalities (in addition to IPO and VNG, also G40 and G4). In addition to themes such as ERDF-ESF synergy and the partnership agreement, the preparation of Administrative Consultations was also discussed. The IBW reported to a political steering group consisting of the same institutions. The steering group of 11 July 2012, for example, already included outlines of the four ERDF OPs and the implementation structure for ERDF 2014-20.

Incidentally, this preparation was more complicated because coordination with the ESF was necessary, but there were also discussions about demarcation with the POP (rural development policy), as the EAFRD was still a structural fund at the time.

For the ERDF programmes, the Ministry of Economic Affairs organised the LOOP (National Consultation on Operational Programmes - landelijk Overleg Operationele Programma's in Dutch). This LOOP consisted of the 4 regional ERDF programmes. Three programmes were represented by provinces, for the West Netherlands programme the representative was the city of Rotterdam. LOOP reported back to the IBW on a regular basis and submitted its recommendations to the Steering Group for decision-making. In addition to the ministry, two representatives were affiliated per region. In the West, these were the head of the MA West Netherlands and the EU representative of Rotterdam. Then the Netherlands also had to submit a comprehensive partnership agreement. De facto, the various Operational Programmes were used as building blocks for this.

At the level of the West Netherlands programme, work was started in 2011 with the preliminary outline for the RIS3, which was to become an ex-ante conditionality for the period 2014-2020.

Much of the work took place in 2013, while the country envelope was not announced until July and there was still some wrangling over the distribution among the provinces. A Steering Group meeting was held in October, at which the 100% version of the OPs was adopted. These were then submitted to the European Commission, after which formal negotiations took place in spring.

The negotiations in Brussels were led by the ministry, but the preparations were done by the LOOP members, which were also involved in the talks with the European Commission.

During the implementation phase of the 2014-2020 programme, due to its position as MA, the city is present in several coordination mechanisms. One is the cross-fund meeting (fonds-over-schrijdend overleg) which is organized by the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Here all CPR funds are present and discussion topics should be relevant to all funds (e.g. how to jointly interpret new regulations).

A second coordination mechanism is among the four regional ERDF programmes only. Here the role of the national level is limited and responsibility for working groups is divided among the four programmes.

As an MA the city was also directly discussing with the Ministry of Social Affairs in the preparation of the programme West Netherlands II regarding the integration of ESF in the SUD ITIs. During the programme that changed to structural meetings (3 times a year) between the two responsible MAs, two ministries and the 4 ITI cities, represented by 1 ERDF and 1 ESF civil servant). Once the main funding was allocated, the rhythm of these meetings slowed down and changed into monitoring of progress.

**Table 4.4**  
**Rotterdam's engagement in delivering cohesion policy 2014-2020**

Document	Level	Pro-gram-ming	Managing	Phase			Role
				Implement-ing	Managing Authority	Interme-diate Body	
ERDF	Regional	x	x	x	x		y
ESF	National	x		x			y

Source: author's own elaboration

### 4.3.2 2021-2027 programming period

Involvement of the city in the preparation of the 2021-2027 period used the same structures. The city was involved in the position paper of the VNG that stressed themes based on the Europe 2020 strategy, simplification, more local initiative, a mix of loans and grants, better cross-border coordination and a European Urban Agenda<sup>16</sup>. This time there was also a joint (with the national government) national position in April 2017.

A “light” partnership was established, for which very limited consultation took place. However, preparations were already well underway at the end of 2018. LOOP was now called “quartermaster consultations”. Again the head of the MA West Netherlands and the EU representative of Rotterdam represented the West-Netherlands programme in these discussions. A main discussion theme was whether there should be 1 or 4 ERDF OPs. The national government believed that it could implement the programmes more efficiently and effectively with fewer resources. Ultimately, a political agreement was reached in which the four regions would implement the programmes but coordinate them in such a way that similar structures would be used to ensure optimal recognisability for applicants. The idea is that it should not matter whether you submit an application in the North, South or West, other than that the substantive priorities as set out in the calls may differ. This was discussed nationally in a core IBW and various sub-IBWs (to explore specific themes in greater depth).

The decision-making process surrounding React-EU in the meantime and JTF on top of that, as well as the Ministry of Economic Affairs' desire to put everything on the agenda as a single decision, complicated matters somewhat. Once all this had been decided and the starting point of four ERDF OPs had been definitively confirmed, the programme representatives (Rotterdam in the case of the West-Netherlands programme) not only drew up the OPs but also submitted them to the EC and negotiated them themselves. They did so with feedback from the ministry, but without the ministry being involved in the negotiations.

In the 2021-2027 period ESF is no longer part of the SUD ITIs and the Rotterdam Managing Authority is also the intermediate body for the JTF plans for IJmond and Rijnmond.

Even though the ESF would be separated from the ERDF implementation, ESF now work with labour market regions where regions have more leeway to decide on themes and types of beneficiaries. Rotterdam, as the largest beneficiary of ESF support in the Netherlands, represents the G4 cities in the development and implementation of the ESF in the Netherlands.

As intermediate body for two JTF plans, the MA West Netherlands fulfills a secretariat role in the regional steering groups for the JTF. Notably, the steering groups, that comprises of partners that are also ERDF and ESF partners, discuss call strategies. There, for example, they can decide to have a certain theme the first year in the ERDF call and the next year in the JTF. The decision to work with regional steering groups was inspired by the ERDF way of working in the Netherlands. Employment regions, which are ESF+ stakeholders, were added to these regional steering groups. These steering groups meet more regularly than the Monitoring Committee, 4 or 5 times a year. It is at this regional level that complementarities with ERDF and ESF calls are discussed.

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<sup>16</sup> Association of Dutch Municipalities (2017)

**Table 4.5**  
**Rotterdam's engagement in delivering Cohesion Policy 2021-2027**

Document	Level	Pro-gram-ming	Phase			Managing Authority	Interme-diate Body	Role Benefi-ciary
			Managing	Implement-ing				
JTF	National	x	x	x		x	y	
ERDF	Regional	x	x	x	x		y	
ESF+	National	x		x			y	

Source: author's own elaboration

### 4.3.3 Main differences

Even though the general approach stayed the same, there were some changes in the way Rotterdam was involved in the design of CP programmes in the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods. Next to VNG and EU network position papers, there was now also a joint (with the national government) national position from April 2017. This has been continued with the new role of the Urban Envoy and the stronger role of the BNC meetings, resulting in a common National/regional/local level position of the Netherlands towards post 2028 CP.

There was a lighter consultation between funds and the ERDF programmes consultation changed names. Yet, the role of the programme representatives (Rotterdam in the case of the West-Netherlands programme) was even stronger. Not only did they draw up the Operational Programmes, in the 2021-2027 period they also led the negotiations with the European Commission. In the 2024-2020 period these negotiations were led by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

The disconnection between ESF and ERDF in the 2021-2027 period meant that there was no longer any programmatic coordination at the level of the MAs and the ESF representative no longer takes part in the SAG. However, at the level of the SUD ITI a local strategist from the Work and Income cluster still participates in the urban advisory group.<sup>17</sup> Several interviewees that participate in the SAG mention that differences at the local ITI project level are not so tangible, likely because integrated ERDF-ESF projects also did not materialise in the 2014-2021 period.

The additional role as intermediary body in two Just Transition Plans now gives the city a role in another strategic programme for the city. Investments from the JTF are directed at the port area of Rotterdam, a hugely important area for the local, regional and national economy. These investments will have a strong impact on the green transition, both in terms of physical improvements to factories and in (re)skilling workers to operate these new technologies.

Over the various programme periods the city as MA has gained a reputation as being very professional and effective. The European Commission and other MAs, both within and outside the Neth-

<sup>17</sup> Interview EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

erlands, consult Rotterdam for advice. Rotterdam is proof that cities can be good MAs and this contributes to the influence of cities in cohesion policy.<sup>18</sup> Regarding the urban policy in the Netherlands, supported by CP, it can be said that as MA, Rotterdam administers 100% of this, because Rotterdam is also the responsible authority for the SUD ITIs of The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht.

#### 4.4 Networking and lobbying activity

Participating in different arenas helps cities to be more influential and gain competitive advantages when it comes to benefitting from the EU Cohesion Policy. This section explores Rotterdam's actual involvement in networking.

The city of Rotterdam is well organized in the field of lobby and networking. Rotterdam has its own Brussels office as part of the G4 cities. One civil servant represents the municipality at the European institutions in Brussels as part of the team that coordinates EU affairs for the municipality on behalf of the mayor and vice-mayors.

This civil servant has been closely involved in lobbying on cohesion policy since the mid-1990s. Initially through CI URBAN and innovative actions, later through the D2 urban programme and, for the last three periods, in the negotiations for the regional West Netherlands programme. This was done in close cooperation (as a duo) with the Managing Authority. Since the administrative management authority is the Municipal Executive of Rotterdam, he also (indirectly) represents the management authority in Brussels.

Within the city administration each of the five clusters has its own EU coordinator, and the municipal coordination is carried out by the Administrative Affairs Department. There are monthly coordination meetings and additional meetings when necessary. Rotterdam has its own EU strategy “Nieuwe Europese Energie voor Rotterdam” drafted in 2019 and updated in 2023. Based on this strategy the city administration has a work programme to put this strategy in practice through the matching of EU and city priorities.<sup>19</sup>

Coordinators are the points of contact within the clusters. They are familiar with the current priorities and have contacts with specific colleagues for specific new EU policy, legislation and regulations, and potential subsidy projects. The municipal EU coordination team within the Public Affairs unit also acts as the eyes and ears of the municipality (in Brussels) and has a broad overview of EU developments. They report these to their colleagues, but it is ultimately up to these colleagues with expertise in the relevant areas to assess how relevant the EU proposals are to their portfolios and whether and how (themselves, via the Association of Dutch Municipalities, central government, EU networks) to respond. There was an intention to develop a tool for this, but this proved to be too complicated, at least for now.

There is no formal and separate role for the MA in EU affairs coordination for the city, as this role is fulfilled by the EU coordinator of the directorate of City Development where the office of the MA is located. Furthermore, the office of the MA is working on behalf of the partnership of the 4 provinces and 4 cities. However, they are closely involved when it concerns the West Netherlands or the JTF Rijnmond programmes. Working visits, recently for the Executive Vice-President of the

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<sup>18</sup> Interview Urban Envoy, 30 April 2025

<sup>19</sup> Municipality of Rotterdam (2023a)

Commission Mr Fitto, are organised by the EU coordination team, naturally in close cooperation with the MA office for the local project visits and substantive preparation.

Rotterdam is a city with many international connections through their participation in many networks, from the national to the global level. A more limited number of these networks regularly discuss CP and produce position papers. The most influential one according to Rotterdam is Eurocities, of which Rotterdam was even a founding member. A second one is ICLEI, a network active in 125 countries on sustainable urban development. As RexCom member Rotterdam is joining the ICLEI delegation in the Local Alliance on discussions on the future MFF and CP. Also very relevant is the Polis network that tries to influence CP on the aspect of sustainable urban mobility.

Another important institution is the European Committee of the Regions of which Rotterdam was a member from the beginning till 2024. Since members are elected representatives, the then Mayor of Rotterdam knew his local mandate was ending and did not want to pre-empt a decision for a new Mayor. Even though Rotterdam is currently not a member, the head of the Rotterdam MA is the advisor on CP for the Committee Member province of Flevoland (which is part of the West Netherlands programme). In addition, the MA is working closely with VNG in supporting the mayor of Purmerend who is the local member working on CP within the European Committee of the Regions.

Other networks work more on specific topics and CP is discussed more incidentally. That is for example the case of the international Resilient Cities Network. It is following the work on resilience in this network that the Veerkracht BoTu strategy was developed. Rotterdam is also member of EU networks for urban security and radicalization awareness, or the Strong Cities Network in the framework of the OECD. Security is an important political topic in Rotterdam, which is shown by the role of vice-president that the mayor of Rotterdam has taken up in the European Forum for Urban Security.

Rotterdam is also member of 2 EU Missions: 100 Climate Neutral and Smart Cities, and Climate Adaptation.

Finally, the national networks are also important platforms for CP related discussions. Cooperation within the G4 is especially strong for ESF-related matters, where Rotterdam represents the G4 in discussions with the national or European level.<sup>20</sup> The VNG is officially represented in the multilevel BNC working group that discusses CP and also prepared its own Position Papers on the future of CP and the MFF. Rotterdam is the president of the VNG Committee for Spatial Planning and Housing and as such member of the Presidium.

**Table 4.6**  
**Networking and lobbying activity of Rotterdam, Netherlands**

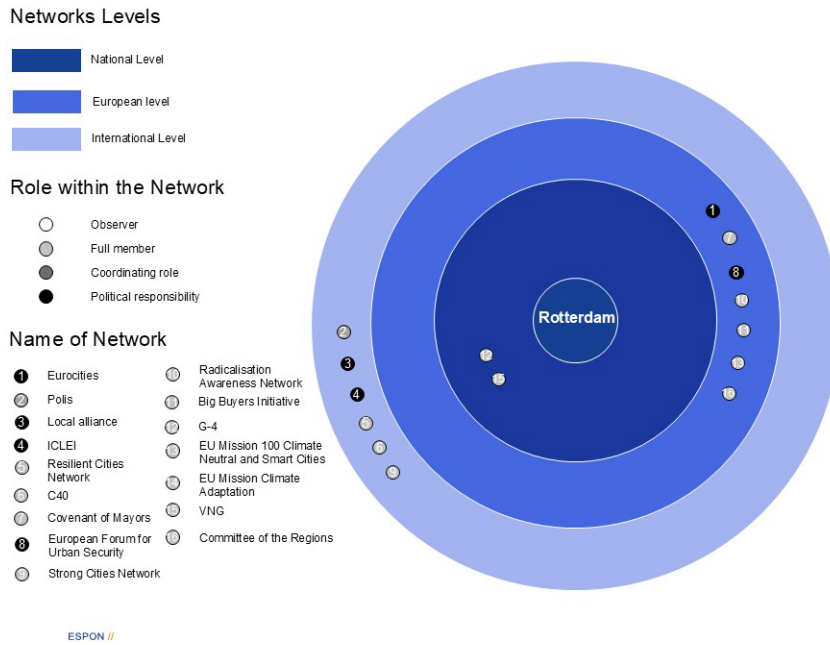
Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Eurocities	European	General	Full member	Rotterdam is a founding member
Polis	International	Urban mobility	full member	

<sup>20</sup> Interview EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

Name of the network	Level	Topic	Role	Additional comment
Local Alliance	International	MFF – Cohesion Policy	Partner through ICLEI	Is a network of networks
ICLEI	International	Sustainability	political responsibility	Member of Regional executive committee Europe
Resilient Cities Network	International	Resilience / adaptation	Member	
European Forum for Urban Security	European	Urban Security	political responsibility	Mayor is vice-president
Strong Cities Network	OECD	Urban Security	Member	
Radicalisation Awareness Network	European	Radicalisation	Member	
G-4	national	lobby	Member	Cooperation of the 4 major Dutch cities on various topics
EU Mission 100 Climate Neutral and Smart Cities	European	Climate & Energy	member	Awaiting decision for awarding EU Label
EU Mission Climate Adaptation	European	Climate Adaptation	member	
VNG	national	National association	Member and chair of one of the committees	
Committee of the Regions	European	General	n.a.	Member from the start till 2024

Source: author's own elaboration

**Figure 4.3**  
**Networking mapping of Rotterdam, the Netherlands**



Source: authors' own elaboration

## 5 Administrative capacity and Institutional innovations

This section explores any barriers and constraints the city encounters in accessing EU funding and innovations introduced by the city to enhance administrative capacity and improve coordination of urban issues at the city level with supra-local priorities and principles, including those at the EU, national, and regional levels.

### 5.1 Administrative capacity and management gaps

When speaking about the capacity to develop projects or manage programmes a distinction should be made between the role of Rotterdam as a managing authority and its role as a beneficiary of EU projects. As MA, the city receives technical assistance for the management of the programme. The MA has gained solid experience in managing the West Netherlands programme and has developed tools such as the Urban Advisory Group to ensure a high quality assessment of urban projects, a one-stop shop for applicants to support applicants in the early stage of their project development, programme offices with qualified staff that assess projects on technical aspects, covenants with other programme partners to clarify the role of each one, etc. That has resulted in a highly professional organization with no obvious capacity issues.

Likewise, the city is well organized to capture EU funding as beneficiary. There is close cooperation between colleagues for accountability and lobbying. Decisions on deployment and available capacity are made within the clusters. Municipal coordination takes place within the EU coordinators team and then in the Executive Management Team. Depending on the issue, administrative coordination involves either the entire municipal executive or only the responsible alderman. The latter may be the case for participation in and cofinancing of a project clearly allocated to a certain policy field. The entire executive is typically involved in EU projects that are multi-thematic and in which more than one administrative cluster participates.

When applying for subsidies, a distinction is made between “single project applications” and more complex and extensive programme applications. For “single project applications”, it is sufficient to submit a proposal that is in line with the subsidy conditions. The starting point is that Rotterdam's priorities are leading and that scarce resources are not used for non-priority topics.

During the preparatory phase, the clusters examine which projects eligible for a European application could be prepared. For example, the BCO's Digital Office assists in researching and guiding subsidy processes, including searching for suitable partners, partly with the help of specialised subsidy tools. In doing so, Rotterdam also looks explicitly at knowledge institutions and companies in the city in order to obtain the broadest possible European funding for the city's challenges.

The final applications are prepared with the help of two project offices for the social and physical domains respectively. Both offices work (partly) across clusters and regionally to acquire subsidies from specific funds.

The Urban Development Expertise Centre IBS supports colleagues in identifying opportunities and applying for, administering, implementing and accounting for subsidies, including European subsidies. The International Relations and European Subsidies (IZES) team is responsible for international contacts in the social domain. The team assists municipal departments in formulating project proposals and applying for and administering EU subsidies. It manages the EU network portfolio for the clusters Social Development and Work & Income and is responsible for targeted lobbying with regard to the European Social Fund (ESF).

This has resulted in the development of specific knowledge in the field of various European funds and a very good overview of the available opportunities. This knowledge is necessary to ensure successful applications and the solid implementation of projects. If very specific knowledge is required for certain funds, this knowledge/capacity may be hired or obtained from specialised external agencies.<sup>21</sup>

However, interviews and Rotterdam Policy Lab did identify certain challenges. In the way the city develops its projects, often there is the need for a colleague from a project office with project development skills and knowledge, and the input from colleagues from units that can provide the subject content needed. It is sometimes this last group of colleagues, with many different tasks on their plate, that is not available. This capacity problem becomes bigger if there are several project opportunities on the same topic, e.g. green energy, because the topic is followed by only a limited number of colleagues and they cannot assume work on more than one or two projects simultaneously<sup>22</sup>.

Capacity might also become a problem for more complex multi-thematic and innovative projects. Within the organization it means that more units and clusters are involved, which also need to provide co-financing individually because Rotterdam has no internal co-financing fund. When more than one EU programme is involved, this also increases complexity with different terminology, non-aligned rules and reporting obligations, different timing. Even though one interviewee recognizes that such projects also provide many benefits such as improved cooperation between different clusters, the possibility of an integrated approach to urban problems, experimentation and innovation.

A last barrier that was mentioned is the limited accessibility of some programmes (e.g. Interreg) for social issues<sup>23</sup> which limits the possibility of the social departments of the city participating in these programmes.

## 5.2 Multilevel governance

A functioning multilevel governance is paramount in delivering Cohesion Policy. On the contrary, poorly functioning governance is considered a hampering factor that slows its implementation. Therefore this section dives deeper into the role the national government plays in CP and whether this role is considered positive or negative.

Several interviewees comment that this is a complex question because the national government plays different roles in different funds and programmes. With ERDF the main role is for the regions and the city of Rotterdam as MA. The national government only plays a coordinating role in the coordination of the Partnership Agreement and discussions with the European Commission. Also within Interreg, provinces and the national government work together, and in this case the national government has a facilitating role. According to the head of the strategy unit, these are examples of good cooperation.

The ESF+ and the JTF, on the other hand, are both national programmes for which funds are made available to regions. Although the city considers its involvement in the implementation as quite

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<sup>21</sup> Municipality of Rotterdam (2023a)

<sup>22</sup> Rotterdam Policy Lab, 1 July 2025

<sup>23</sup> Interview EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

good, they are more dependent on the national government. One example is ESF. The fact that in the 2014-2020 period ERDF and ESF were combined in the Rotterdam ITI had certainly advantages according to Rotterdam's EU coordinator for the social development cluster. Such an approach helped to bring ERDF and ESF worlds together, have a joint appreciation of employment issues and learn to work together in joint advisory committees. However, there were also significant challenges, such as different regimes and steering policy departments, and initial communication problems between ERDF and ESF experts. It was difficult to achieve synergy at project level in the first programme period and therefore difficult to communicate the success of this approach. Subsequently the decision was taken at the national level to stop this integration in the 2021-2027 period, a decision regretted by the EU coordinator<sup>24</sup>.

In the case of the JTF there first were political discussions at national level on which areas were to benefit from the programme. During the implementation phase the city has the role of IB for 2 Just Transition plans, however decisions on project selection are taken by the national managing authority. This means that projects are also subject to political scrutiny during the programme. That is a different dynamic.

Thirdly, the case of RRF is a clear example of how not to do things. Here cities and provinces were not involved and funding went to existing national programmes. This case is explained in detail in section 8. This proved to the city that good intergovernmental cooperation is not a given and needs to be gained each time a new EU fund or programme is set up.

Provinces are partners in the West Netherlands programme but they don't have a managing position. This is neither the case in the ESF. In the JTF programme, the alderman of Rotterdam and the regional minister of the Province of South Holland are the rotating presidencies of the regional steering group. In addition, the Rotterdam's alderman is also member of the Monitoring Committee of the national JTF programme. In the West Netherlands programme 50% of the Rotterdam earmarking is for the Rotterdam ITI and 50% for the Rotterdam part of the regional call. In practice, many projects around transitions, especially in the regional component of the ERDF West Netherlands programme and in the JTF programme, use extensive ecosystems of stakeholders. For the energy transition in the port area these are for examples companies, port authorities, educational institutions, research institutes. Even though a project might physically be in the Rotterdam municipality, often many stakeholders come from the region.

The Province of South Holland has set up a Regional Coordination meeting on EU Funds (Regionaal Afstemingsoverleg Europese Fondsen – RAEF) in which the municipalities and the Province South-Holland participate and where the interlinkages of these ecosystems could be discussed. However, the RAEF does not meet frequently and it could be more strategic and future oriented. Some regional partners like waterboards could be more active partners in projects on resilience and nature-based solutions<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Rotterdam Policy Lab, 1 July 2025

### 5.3 Financial constraints and technical complexity

The political discourse always accompanies finance and funding availability of Cohesion Policy in each country. This sub-chapter zooms in on the financial and technical constraints encountered by Rotterdam.

The general amount of cohesion policy funding for the city is relatively small. Around 10 million in project funding per year with obvious differences per year, depending on project payments. Of this about 5 million is ESF and 5 million is other funding. Of a total municipal budget of close to 5 billion euro, this is close to 0 %. However, of this 5 billion, only around 400 million can be yearly invested in projects. In this case 10 million is 2,5% which makes this contribution more impactful.

Although ESF resources are limited, they are used in a very specific way. A reduction in resources would therefore have a significant negative impact. This is particularly true because national resources are also being reduced and cannot be replaced.<sup>26</sup>

The Netherlands being a developed country the co-financing rate is capped at 50%. For PO1 and 4 this is only 40%, for PO8 and PO9 this is 50%. All 8 partners in the ERDF West-Netherlands programme have the obligation to provide co-financing for their own projects. The maximum amount provided by the state is agreed in a 'Uitvoeringsregeling EFRO' or Executive Rule ERDF. The parts provided by the provinces and cities are agreed in the 'Covenant of Kansen voor West partners'. The amount still missing for project financing is to be put on the table by the project partners themselves and this can come from other local, regional or national programmes.

In addition to ESF and ERDF, Rotterdam participates in programmes such as Interreg, LIFE or Horizon where the EU co-financing rate is higher.

The West Netherlands programme partners The Hague and North-Holland have set a budget aside for cofinancing their own projects, typically for an amount of maximum 25% of the project value. Rotterdam does not have that. That means that for each project the city participates in, cofinancing must be found. For some units with little investment budget that can be a problem. It is often also an additional complication for multi-thematic projects where several units or clusters are involved because each needs to organize their own co-financing. The city of The Hague has its own co-financing fund that can support municipal EU projects and alleviates the co-financing burden for individual municipal departments. This does not exist in Rotterdam. Rotterdam's solution is to request EU support only for city projects in a priority field for which the city has already reserved local funding. This way EU support can fill financing gaps in projects and add innovative elements or additional partnerships, EU funding is not used to replace local funding. Given the relatively small amounts involved, the city does not design projects just to get European funding, nor does it revise its policies with the aim of receiving additional EU funding.<sup>27</sup>

### 5.4 Innovations and good practices

This section explores the innovative actions/initiatives that have allowed Rotterdam to partially or totally overcome barriers and constraints related to the Cohesion Policy.

<sup>26</sup> Interview EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

<sup>27</sup> URDICO Rotterdam hearing, 21 February 2025

## Innovations in multilevel governance

In section 3 several Dutch coordination and information mechanisms are described that can be considered innovative: the function of Urban Envoy, Kenniscentrum Europa Decentraal (KED), Interdepartmental Working Group for the Assessment of New Commission Proposals (BNC). Although these mechanisms are not only for coordinating cohesion policy, they ensure that cities are involved early on and can acquire CP knowledge and skills.

## Innovations within the SUD ITI

**Urban CLLD in 2021-2027:** In the 2014-2020 period the West Netherlands II programme had experimented with a urban CLLD in the city of The Hague. In the 2021-2027 period the CLLD is also implemented in the BoTu neighbourhood in Rotterdam. This is one of the newly added neighbourhoods to the SUD ITI. This neighbourhood was selected based on its socio-economic indicators, but also on the existence of a local Resilient BoTu 2028 programme, that could serve as a basis for a CLLD. In the CLLD a Local Action Group takes decisions. They decide how the process is organized and which neighbourhood-projects receive funding. The process is facilitated by the municipality. The LAG consists of 45 people: inhabitants of BoTu, professionals (Housing corporation, police, doctor, school principal, local business owners, etc.) and members of the elected Neighbourhood council.<sup>28</sup>

**Urban advisory group.** The urban advisory group has been in existence since 1993, when Rotterdam, together with Lisbon and London, was one of the first cities to receive EU funding. The MA recently renewed the composition of the group, with the exception of one member, in order to bring in “new blood”. There is a requirement that no more than half of the members may be civil servants; in Rotterdam, there is only one civil servant member.<sup>29</sup>

**One-stop shop for applicants:** In the Netherlands, coordination between ERDF and ESF was mentioned as an obstacle but improved during the implementation phase. Nevertheless, even though the ITIs were integrated at programme level, at project level there were very few projects that used both ERDF and ESF funding. In general rules for European funding are perceived as very complex in relation to national funding opportunities. The Information Points that served as a ‘single entry point’ for (potential) project promoters was one attempt to make this funding more accessible.<sup>30</sup>

**Social Impact Fund – Rotterdam (SIFR):** The West Netherlands programme uses financial instruments which have (partly) a revolving character to increase the impact of the limited finances available. One successful instrument is the SIFR. The fund aims to increase employment opportunities for people who are distanced from the labour market and to combat poverty in the city of Rotterdam. They do this by investing in social enterprises and regular businesses and by strengthening partnerships within Rotterdam's impact ecosystem. The fund focuses on social entrepreneurs and their solutions to urban challenges and aims to fill the gap in their access to private finance.<sup>31</sup>

The concept has been adopted by other cities such as Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Haarlem (in development). The fund works with revolving money, which allows for flexibility in its use. The

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<sup>28</sup> Managing Authority ERDF West Netherlands (2023)

<sup>29</sup> Interview head of Managing Authority West Netherlands, 12 May 2025

<sup>30</sup> Kah, S., et al. (2022)

<sup>31</sup> <https://sifr.nl>

MA is considering submitting the fund for the Regio Star Awards to generate European awareness.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, the renewed SOFIE fund, supports impact entrepreneurs with loans for accessible office space and initiatives that contribute to housing and neighbourhood improvement or the creation of a varied housing supply<sup>33</sup>.

At city level the **project development offices** are an innovative approach for better coordinating EU funding. This is described under point 6.1. Besides the innovations, there are 4 good practices that are described in detail in the box below. The descriptions address the topics that are targeted, what makes it a “good practice”, what are the main lessons learnt, what other cities can learn from it, to what extent it is replicable and scalable, and how it can improve CP.

**Table 5.1**  
**Main innovations implemented at local level**

Name of innovation	Objective (barriers to overcome)	Innovative actions	Results
Urban envoy	Make the voice of Dutch cities heard in Europe	The Urban Envoy can speak in the name of the state and cities	Stronger voice of Dutch cities in Europe and in Dutch policy making
BNC	Sub-national governments are not consistently included in EU position making	An intergovernmental working group where sub-national governments are represented	E.g. Dutch joint multilevel position on future of CP
Kenniscentrum Europa Decentraal	Cities often don't have knowledge about EU funds and policies	An EU knowledge centre dedicated to sub-national governments	Dutch sub-national governments are better informed and skilled in EU affairs
Urban CLLD	Stronger local engagement	A LAG that decides on neighbourhood projects	Stronger local involvement in projects
Urban advisory group	Stakeholder involvement in project selection	A group of stakeholders advises on ITI project selection	Stronger stakeholder involvement
One-stop shop	Different EU-funds hard for beneficiaries to access	One front-office for access to different funds	Easier access for beneficiaries to EU funding
SIFR	Few EU resources for impact financing	A revolving fund for optimal use of EU resources	More beneficiaries supported
Project offices	Technical knowhow needed for EU fund applications	2 project offices in the city administration	Rotterdam is the best Dutch city in EU project development

Source: author's own elaboration

<sup>32</sup> Interview head of Managing Authority West Netherlands, 12 May 2025

<sup>33</sup> [www.sofierotterdam.eu](http://www.sofierotterdam.eu)

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**GOOD PRACTICE**  
**URBAN CLLD**

The urban CLLD targeted the problem that in the more deprived neighbourhoods of Rotterdam a lot of support went to intermediary organisations, without directly including the local population. One interviewee referred to the intermediaries as “people with a Messiah complex” whereby outsiders come to “uplift” the neighbourhood. The CLLD turns this around and makes the neighbourhood decide directly about neighbourhood projects and municipal policy. The CLLD in Rotterdam builds on the experience of a similar project in the Middelland neighbourhood and an urban CLLD in The Hague in the 2014-2020 period. The lesson learned is that working with Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) gives results: local communities trust the municipality more, the LAG is able to assess projects critically. One interviewee stresses that this approach might not work in all neighbourhoods due to residents’ limited ability to look beyond their own interests, their difficult socio-economic position and sometimes limited knowledge of the Dutch language. However, the urban CLLD approach, that in The Netherlands started in The Hague, can be replicated in other cities. This also shows that the CLLD/LEADER approach, with a long history in rural development, can also be successfully applied in urban areas, bringing Europe closer to citizens.

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**GOOD PRACTICE**  
**SOCIAL IMPACT FUND ROTTERDAM**

Social Impact Fund – Rotterdam (SIFR): The fund addresses the topic of lack of access to finance for social entrepreneurs or regular SMEs that want to develop activities with a social impact. It is part of the Rotterdam Impact Coalitie consisting of the municipality, the Voor Goed Agency & Thrive Institute. The fund operates at the frontier of public action and private entrepreneurship. It uses revolving money which increases the support that can be given by 1 euro invested. The main lesson is that this is a cost-effective way to support social entrepreneurs in the city’s neighbourhoods. However, one interviewee also sees a risk of stifling entrepreneurship through excessive subsidies, especially among impact entrepreneurs. It is a balancing act between supporting and stimulating independent entrepreneurship. SIFR was the first such social impact fund in the Netherlands and has been adopted by other cities such as Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht and Haarlem (in development). The MA is considering submitting the fund for the Regio Star Awards to generate European awareness. The challenge of supporting social impact entrepreneurs in deprived urban neighbourhoods is very common in Europe. A Social Impact Fund is a cost-effective way to provide this support.

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**GOOD PRACTICE****PROJECT OFFICES**

Within the city administration there is a need for specific knowledge and skills to apply for, implement and do the reporting for EU funded projects. To provide this expertise the city of Rotterdam has 2 project offices, one for the social domain and one for the physical domain. Other departments of the city also apply for project funding based on their own networks and expertise and there is no coordination between these departments and the project units, or among the project units. However, the backup knowledge and expertise of the project offices is always available. This skill development and light-touch coordination has led to Rotterdam being the most successful city in EU project applications. The lesson learned is that specific skills are needed for EU projects and that it is worth investing in those. At the same time strong coordination is not needed in order to be successful. This is a strategic decision other cities could take too and will likely be rewarded with more EU supported projects. More competent local authorities in project development will lead to better EU projects that are implemented in places where they are most visible to people: cities.

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**GOOD PRACTICE****URBAN ENVOY**

The Urban Envoy can represent both the national government and cities, and in this sense the position is a form of “multi-level governance” in itself. The main objective is to strengthen the role and position of cities in the EU. This mandate of the Urban Envoy is unique in Europe. One of the achievements of the Urban Envoy is to establish a strong Intergovernmental cooperation on EU cohesion policy in the Netherlands. In practice, this was achieved through a strong role of municipalities in the Interdepartmental Working Group for the Assessment of New Commission Proposals (BNC in Dutch). The Urban Envoy is part of this group, representing the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK). This group prepares common Dutch positions towards new Commission Proposals. They do this by preparing BNC fiches (Assessments of New Commission proposals) and sharing instructions for council working groups. The BNC is interdepartmental and intergovernmental. This close multilevel governance has resulted in a common position of the Dutch national government, provinces and cities on the future of CP. Even though the topic of funding is not addressed in this position, many principles are. This gives the Netherlands a strong shared consensus among government levels on how the new CP should be implemented.

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## 5.5 Added value of negative experiences

Sometimes, institutional failures pave the way for new, unpredictable solutions. This section explores not well-performed practices from which Rotterdam has learnt the most. In several interviews the same two negative experiences were mentioned.

The first was the difficult integration of ERDF and ESF funding into one SUD ITI due to different implementing organisations and models, a lack of integration between the two funds, and legal and financial rules that were not well aligned. According to the MA a lesson for the future: when combining funds, it is important to coordinate the organizational and implementation aspects well. This lesson seems to already have been taken to heart in the setup of the JTF programme. This is explained in more detail in chapter 3.

The second was the limited role for cities in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan because initial attempts to involve cities were not followed through. The Ministry of Finance decided with minimal consultation of local and regional authorities. In retrospect, Rotterdam (as most other cities) did receive money to prepare brownfield locations for housing development. However, these were re-labeled national projects which led to very low visibility of the European aspect of the projects. The widespread dissatisfaction among the regional and local stakeholder about how the NRRP was designed and implemented in the Netherlands led to a renewed attention to the importance of the partnership principle (new Social Climate Fund) and upcoming (new programming period of Cohesion Policy) for effective and efficient policy implementation. Other lessons and consequences were an increase in the implementation burden for existing national projects due to European accountability, recognition by the Ministry of Finance that the approach was not optimal, and greater understanding of the complexity of EU funds among various parties.

**Table 5.2**  
**Added value of negative experiences in Rotterdam**

Name of the Initiative	Topic	Objective	What went wrong	What the city learnt
ITI supported by ERDF and ESF	ERDF and ESF integration	Integrate ERDF and ESF in the SUD ITI	No integration at project level	Systems need to be in place to make integration work
NRRF	Partnership principle	Have a city role as in CP	Cities were excluded from design and implementation	Even in the Netherlands city involvement is not a given

Source: author's own elaboration.

## 6 Cohesion Policy contributions to city long-term agendas

The objective of this chapter is to provide evidence-based information on whether and how the urban dimension of the Cohesion Policy contributes to Rotterdam's long-term agendas and the localisation of EU priorities. Additionally, this part explores how this policy framework can evolve to meet new and emerging needs.

### 6.1 Main development instruments

In this sub-chapter existing development policy and planning instruments are described. According to interviewees, at the level of the city there are two main guiding documents for city policy. The first is the Environment Vision which is an obligatory document according to the Dutch Environment Act. The second is the Coalition Agreement; the political agreement between Rotterdam's governing parties for the duration of their mandate.

#### **Omgevingsvisie – De Veranderstad (Environment Vision)**

De Omgevingsvisie, or Environment Vision of Rotterdam, outlines five strategic priorities to promote sustainable and inclusive urban growth. These include transforming the city into a healthier, greener, and more attractive place to live and work; encouraging compact urbanisation around public transport hubs; strengthening vibrant and equal neighbourhoods; advancing the transition to clean energy and circular use of resources; and renewing the city's economic base through innovation and sustainable industry. Key actions include creating green spaces, reducing car dominance, promoting cycling and walking, improving housing and amenities, and enhancing access to education and employment for all residents.

The vision also identifies strategic areas where multiple urban goals intersect, such as the city centre, Alexander–Zuidplein zone, and Rotterdam South. These areas will see targeted investment in high-density housing, public transport, green infrastructure, and public space improvements. The city centre will become more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly, while South Rotterdam is evolving from a focus on deficits to highlighting its strengths and opportunities. The environmental vision is monitored and evaluated every two years through the ROER framework, allowing for adjustments when needed to respond to emerging challenges and maintain a high quality of life.

The Environment Vision of Rotterdam is a policy document adopted by the municipal council and prepared within the municipality of Rotterdam. The national Environment Act obliges the city to develop such a vision, the Act also mandates Environment Programmes aimed at implementation. The Strategy department of Rotterdam is responsible for the environmental programme instrument, which translates the framework of the Environment Vision into implementation measures. As the Act was only recently introduced, city environment programmes do not yet exist, but work is underway to develop these.

In the Netherlands, the same system (vision and implementation programmes) is applied within different levels of government (municipality, province, state). This creates a logic whereby layers of government complement each other and are more focused on the longer term – beyond political mandates. Example: air quality, where European limit values lead to mandatory actions at municipal level, but where scaling-up resources may come from the province or national government.

## Coalitie akkoord 2022-2026 – Eén Stad

This document is the Coalition Agreement for Rotterdam (2022–2026), outlining the city’s strategic goals and policy priorities across seven main areas. It presents a vision of “One City” and aims to build a safe, inclusive, sustainable, and economically vibrant Rotterdam. These 7 areas are:

1. **A Safe, Clean, and Green City.** This focuses on public safety and cleanliness. It includes measures against gun violence, street nuisance, organized crime, and cybercrime. It also promotes cleaner and greener public spaces, animal welfare, and increased supervision and enforcement.
2. **Equal Opportunities.** This emphasizes inclusion, anti-discrimination, and education. It addresses racism, historical injustices, poverty reduction, and labour market participation. It also covers access to quality education, both local and international, and financial support mechanisms.
3. **Housing and Mobility.** Here the aims are to ensure affordable, pleasant housing for all and improve urban mobility. Topics include urban development, car-free zones, cycling infrastructure, public transport, road safety, and parking policy.
4. **Climate and Energy.** This part sets out Rotterdam’s approach to the energy transition, promoting solar and wind power, phasing out natural gas, improving insulation, supporting a circular economy, and ensuring clean air.
5. **Care, Welfare, and Sport.** This covers healthcare access, youth and elderly care, general welfare, and the promotion of sports and physical activity. It includes a Rotterdam healthcare agreement and support for vulnerable populations.
6. **Economy, Port, Entrepreneurship, Tourism, and Culture.** This chapter outlines economic strategies including innovation in the port (like hydrogen use), entrepreneurship, hospitality, tourism, and cultural promotion. It supports a modern, sustainable economy tied to Rotterdam’s identity.
7. **Governance, Organisation, and Finance.** Here Rotterdam will focus on transparent, efficient governance, administrative integrity, and sound financial management. It sets financial rules, investment plans, and explains the budgetary implications of the coalition’s objectives.

Interviewees indicate that this is not a detailed city strategy but a political prioritisation of the city’s major challenges. Each city cluster develops its own strategy, based on this Coalition Agreement.

For the ITI area some other plans are also relevant. First there is the National Programme Rotterdam South which is a very long-term investment in that part of the city, supported by the national government. Secondly there is the Urban Implementation Plan for the ITI that is part of the West Netherlands programme. And thirdly, there is the neighbourhood Bospolder-Tussendijken plan, called Veerkrachtig BoTu 2028. This plan is the basis for the urban CLLD that has been set up in this neighbourhood.

**The National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRZ)** is the leading strategic initiative in the area, operating as a network-based organisation that manages funding for projects focused on education, employment, and living conditions. Its objective is to raise outcomes in these fields to match the average levels of the Netherlands’ four largest cities, working within a long-term timeframe from 2012 to 2030. The programme involves a wide range of partners, including

national and municipal governments, employers, housing corporations, educational institutions, industry players, police, and healthcare providers.

The NPRZ is built around three core pillars: developing talent through education and skills training, boosting the local economy and reducing joblessness, and enhancing the physical quality of housing and the urban environment. Because the NPRZ is a strategy with a time horizon of 20 years, every 4 years a new Implementation Plan is designed. The current Implementation Plan for 2023–2027 places a strong focus on collaborative approaches and shared ownership of local initiatives. While the main focus areas - Education, Employment, and Living - remain unchanged, additional attention is now given to public safety and combating domestic violence.

**The Urban Implementation plan** presents an integrated strategy within the Rotterdam ITI framework, combining environmental and social objectives to foster a fair and inclusive transition. Thematic priorities such as the clean energy transition, climate change adaptation, circular economy, and risk management are addressed in conjunction with the sustainable development of urban and deprived areas. The approach aims to bring Europe closer to its citizens by tackling inequalities and involving local communities in shaping and benefiting from these transitions.

In line with EU recommendations, the programme supports the regeneration of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, particularly those with large migrant populations. It promotes business incubators, micro-enterprise support, social innovation, and investments in modern infrastructure to boost lifelong learning and employability. Upskilling and reskilling, especially in digital competencies, are emphasized as crucial to matching labour market demands and coping with the societal changes accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A major concern is that many residents in these urban areas are unable to keep pace with the transitions, resulting in a lack of public support. The strategy seeks to “bring along” these communities by creating employment opportunities generated by the energy and circular economy transitions. Addressing the mismatch in the labour market will enable more people from these neighbourhoods to participate in the workforce. These areas, often facing challenges such as low financial capacity and outdated housing, also have strong potential due to their younger population, making them key to filling skill shortages in emerging professions.

#### **CLLD: Veerkrachtig BoTu 2028**

Rotterdam is part of the Resilient Cities Network, a global initiative focused on addressing challenges like climate change, digitalisation, and globalisation to build cities that are resilient and future-proof. Inspired by this, the city launched the Resilient BoTu 2028 programme, aiming to make Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) the first resilient neighbourhood in Rotterdam within ten years. The goal is to use climate adaptation and the energy transition as tools to increase social resilience. Like the NPRZ programme, the BoTu strategy follows an integrated approach centred on work, housing, and education, with improved safety as a necessary condition. Citizen participation is a key element in both the design and implementation of the programme.

This strategy is structured around a “3x3” model, which combines three main themes with three methods and three target locations. The challenges facing BoTu align closely with the thematic objectives of the ITI programme, which recognises shared priorities between ITI goals and BoTu’s needs. Addressing transitions such as energy, healthcare, and digitalisation requires a skilled

workforce, and linking this labour potential to neighbourhood transitions is seen as a way to boost employment, income, and local initiatives<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://bospoldertussendijken.nl/veerkrachtig-botu/>

**Table 6.1**  
**Main instruments at national, regional and local level**

Instrument	Level	Type (1)	Type (2)	Type (3)	Main Goals	Actors Involved
Environment Vision Rotterdam	municipal	Strategy	statutory but non mandatory	Non-binding	Improve the physical environment	Rotterdam municipality
Coalition Agreement	municipal	Municipal programme	Non-Statutory	Non-binding	Govern the city	Rotterdam municipality
National Programme Rotterdam South	National	strategy	Non-Statutory	Non-binding	Improve life of inhabitants of Rotterdam South	Rotterdam municipality National ministries Police Educational institutes Housing companies Port of Rotterdam Youth and social sector Employment services Construction sector
Veerkrachtig BoTu 2028	neighbourhood	strategy	Non-Statutory	Non-binding	Make BoTu resilient	Rotterdam municipality

Source: author's own elaboration.

## 6.2 Localisation of Cohesion Policy

One of URDICO'S objectives is to provide evidence on the localisation of the Cohesion Policy. This section analyses whether and how local development policies and planning instruments contribute to implementing the Cohesion Policy. It investigates the level of coherence between the adopted documents and the Cohesion Policy strategies and principles.

The Environment Vision of Rotterdam is focused on the physical environment and therefore does not address social aspects. In terms of Thematic Objectives this means that the Vision falls within the objectives 5, 6, 7 and 8. The Coalition Agreement is a very broad, but succinct document that mentions all Cohesion Policy themes, although with very little detail. Therefore, it can be considered to cover all Thematic Objectives.

The NPRZ is the strategy for Rotterdam South that addresses many aspects, both in the physical and social sphere. Research and transport (other than sustainable urban mobility) are not part of

the strategy. Climate change adaptation and protecting the environment are not core parts of the strategy, but they are partly addressed.

The Urban Implementation Plan takes over many of the same wordings. However, due to Cohesion Policy thematic concentration the actions fall under a more limited number of Thematic Objectives: 4, 8 and 9.

The BoTu strategy is in line with the Urban Implementation Plan and therefore pursues the same objectives.

**Table 6.2**  
**Coherence with the Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020**

Tool	Cohesion Thematic Objectives 2014-2020 <sup>35</sup>										
	TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6	TO7	TO8	TO9	TO10	TO11
Environment Vision	NO	NO	NO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	NO	NO
Coalition Agreement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NPRZ	NO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partially	Partially	NO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Urban Implementation Plan	NO	NO	NO	Yes	NO	NO	NO	Yes	Yes	NO	NO
BoTu strategy	NO	NO	NO	Yes	NO	NO	NO	Yes	Yes	NO	NO

Source: author's own elaboration.

The Environment Vision of Rotterdam is focused on the physical environment and therefore does not address social aspects. Most prominent are aspects of liveability, climate adaptation which fall under PO2. At the level of the city connectivity is also addressed, which is PO3. And for several city districts an integrated vision is described which can be considered PO5.

The Coalition Agreement is a very broad, but succinct document that mentions all Cohesion Policy themes, although with very little detail. In that sense all POs are subject of this document.

<sup>35</sup> In the period 2014-2020, the cohesion policy had identified 11 Thematic Objectives: 1. Strengthening research, technological development and innovation; 2. Enhancing access to, and use and quality of, information and communication technologies; 3. Enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs; 4. Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy; 5. Promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management; 6. Preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency; 7. Promoting sustainable transport and improving network infrastructures; 8. Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility; 9. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination; 10. Investing in education, training and lifelong learning and 11. Improving the efficiency of public administration.

The NPRZ is the strategy for Rotterdam South that addresses many aspects, both in the physical and social sphere. However, it does not extensively address innovation (PO1) nor connectivity beyond sustainable urban mobility (PO3).

The Urban Implementation Plan takes over many of the same wordings. However, due to Cohesion Policy thematic concentration the actions officially fall under a more limited number of Policy Objectives: PO2 and PO5 even though PO5 is a very broad policy objective that also includes social and employment objectives. However, the ITI does not include PO4 as a separate policy objective. The BoTu strategy is in line with the Urban Implementation Plan. Because it mentions so clearly a social component the table below also mentions PO4.

**Table 6.3**  
**Coherence with the Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027**

Tool	Cohesion Policy Objectives 2021-2027 <sup>36</sup>				
	PO 1	PO 2	PO 3	PO 4	PO 5
Environment Vision	NO	Yes	Yes	NO	Yes
Coalition Agreement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NPRZ	NO	Yes	NO	Yes	Yes
Urban Implementation Plan	NO	Yes	NO	NO	Yes
BoTu strategy	NO	Yes	NO	Yes	Yes

Source: author's own elaboration.

### 6.3 Key investment areas

Based on the information above, a summary can be made of key investment areas targeted by the local development plans considering the Cohesion Policy objectives of 2014-2020 and 2021-2027.

Of the 5 strategies that are most relevant for EU investments only 1 is directly linked to the CP: the Urban Implementation Plan. This is therefore the only plan that directly refers to CP objectives and fits one-to-one with investment priorities. However, the other documents also include priorities that the municipality then tries to implement with the support of EU funding.

<sup>36</sup> In the period 2021-2027, the cohesion policy has five policy objectives (POs) for the ERDF, the European Social Fund+ and the Cohesion Fund: (i) A smarter Europe – innovative and smart economic transformation (PO1); (ii) A greener, low-carbon Europe (PO2); (iii) A more connected Europe – mobility and regional ICT connectivity (PO3); (iv) A more social Europe – implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights (PO4) and (v) A Europe closer to citizens – sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives (PO5).

To implement the Urban Implementation Plan, a first action line focuses on promoting transitions through tailored support for residents and businesses struggling to adapt. By stimulating neighbourhood-level innovation and establishing a future-proof local economy, the programme aims to foster inclusion, reduce societal divides, and enhance support for transitions. Social innovations developed in cooperation with residents, local entrepreneurs, government, and educational institutions will help address major challenges and ensure that climate measures are socially accepted and equitably distributed.

The second action line strengthens labour potential by tackling the mismatch between labour supply and the demand created by transition-related sectors. This involves retraining and upskilling residents for new roles in promising professions that are emerging in response to climate and digital transformation. These initiatives aim to improve social inclusion, economic independence, and labour mobility by creating solid preconditions for participation in the workforce. Engaging employers and educational institutions is critical, with a focus on providing internships, promoting social entrepreneurship, and integrating entrepreneurship more deeply into school curricula.

The programme takes a fully integrated approach that includes not only economic development but also public health and safety. Climate adaptation measures, such as improving infrastructure to withstand extreme weather, and mitigating the health effects of pollution and climate events, are essential parts of the strategy. Progress in one area, like the energy transition, can build support for other improvements in the neighbourhood.

With its ageing housing stock, BoTu must undergo significant renovation to achieve a successful energy transition. However, this challenge also creates opportunities for job creation and economic revitalisation. The Resilient BoTu programme views these transitions as levers to strengthen the local economy, promote education, reduce poverty, and build community resilience. The programme also highlights the potential of CLLD (Community-Led Local Development) as a framework to deepen community engagement, encouraging residents to participate in designing and implementing local projects. This enhances social cohesion and ensures that solutions reflect the community's real needs.

The municipal Coalition Agreement and Environmental Vision have broader objectives. Both documents form the basis for more action-oriented documents (Environment Programmes or agendas) drawn up by the city clusters. These include, for example, a Climate Action Plan and climate policy, including energy transition, energy poverty policy, participation policy and circular raw materials transition. Applications for EU funds (such as JTF and ERDF) are aligned with these priorities. Current themes such as energy transition, grid congestion and urban division receive extra attention<sup>37</sup>. Alderman Simons specifically mentioned the additional boost ERDF funding was to provide for investments in shore power for (sea) shipping. From 2030, large ships will be obliged to use shore power or other clean fuels. With European funds, this transition can be accelerated, with a significant improvement in air quality and noise pollution for local residents. It is important to note that the city is not necessarily the beneficiary of such projects, but they help to reach city objectives.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview Strategic advisor, 21 May 2025

## 7 Funding schemes and synergies

This chapter provides an overview of the interaction between the urban dimensions of the Cohesion Policy, other EU funding programmes, and both EU and national frameworks for public investments. It will also explore Rotterdam's ability and creativity to leverage EU (and other) funding and financial opportunities effectively.

### 7.1 Funding schemes

This first section investigates the funding schemes that have been used by the city in order to achieve local goals. First looking at the nationally or regionally distributed EU funds, and in a second part at the other relevant EU funds and programmes

#### 7.1.1 Nationally or regionally distributed EU funds

To keep project data collection manageable the URDICO project decided to focus on projects where the city was beneficiary or where public companies owned by the city dealing with urban transport were project beneficiaries. In the case of Rotterdam, a city in a more developed country there is no CP funding available for transport, therefore project data was only collected for projects where the city was beneficiary. In the case of Rotterdam, within the West Netherlands programme, funding is earmarked for the city. Of this earmarked funding about 25% of ERDF<sup>38</sup> goes to projects where the city itself is beneficiary. The other 75% goes to other beneficiaries, mostly companies, research institutes or the third sector. These projects are not included in the analysis.

When only looking at ERDF and ESF projects, there is a clear distinction between the two. The large majority of ERDF projects (7) are within the SUD ITI. Only one project is at the level of the city. This has to do with how Rotterdam has organised its participation in the West Netherlands programme. Even though the majority of the earmarked funding for Rotterdam in the 2014-2020 period was for the regional component of the programme with a focus on innovation (15 million euro) as shown in the table below. In this component the municipality was only once a project partner itself, receiving 2,1 million ERDF. Of the 12,6 million euro ERDF for the SUD ITI, the municipality was a partner in 2 projects and received 1,3 million ERDF in total.

For ESF the situation is different. Here the city is an important beneficiary of ESF resources which are mainly used by the city for two priorities: 1) enhance labour market integration by funding for case management and activities to help people find work and support for staff at youth service centres and 2) social inclusion through an integrated approach for long-term social assistance recipients by tackling multiple problems (debt, mental health issues). In the 2014-2020 period there were 10 ESF projects at the level of the city (60 million) and 2 specifically in the SUD ITI (10 million).

These projects have a long-term perspective. Each run for several years and are then renewed. Rotterdam receives more ESF funding than other municipalities in the Netherlands. This is based on the number of inhabitants that are unemployed (not the percentage of unemployed). Compared to total social security expenditure, ESF is a relatively small component.

The difference between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 period is that in the former period 2 ESF projects were part of the SUD ITI. In the 2021-2027 period all 6 ESF projects are at city level and

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<sup>38</sup> Rotterdam Policy Lab, 1 July 2025

amount so far to 24 million euro. However, according to interviewees in the 2021-2027 period the ERDF-only ITI also managed to support social objectives and city support for social integration and labour market participation is still available for inhabitants of the ITI area. Therefore, the changes on the ground are not so pronounced.

Of the 12 million earmarked for the city for sub-regional projects in none the city was a direct beneficiary so far. In the 12 million earmarked in the 2021-2027 period for Rotterdam's SUD ITI there are until now 5 ERDF projects with the municipality as beneficiary for an ERDF amount of 4,1 million. Of this amount 850 thousand is dedicated to the local CLLD in the BoTu neighbourhood.

**Table 7.1**  
**Rotterdam earmarked part of the West Netherlands programme 2014-2020**

Regional	Earmarked	City as beneficiary
PA 1	12.159.932	2.100.000
PA 2	3.039.983	-
PA 6 (ReactEU)	6.603.623	-
<b>SUD ITI</b>		
PA 2	2.533.319	-
PA 3	4.433.308	1.280.000
PA 3 ESF	9.200.000	10.000.000
PA 4	5.699.968	-
PA 6 (ReactEU)	5.503.018	-

Source: author's own elaboration.

**Table 7.2**  
**Rotterdam earmarked part of the West Netherlands programme 2021-2027**

Regional	Earmarked	City as beneficiary
PA 1	8.407.954	-
PA 2	3.603.409	-
<b>SUD ITI</b>		
PA 2	3.879.670	340.000
PA 5	8.131.692	3.800.000

Source: author's own elaboration.

### 7.1.2 Other relevant EU funds and programmes

Besides the indirect funding mechanisms, the EU has active direct funding schemes. This sub-section explores the different funding channels the city has activated to finance its own strategies.

It is notable that over the entire 2014-2020 period Rotterdam has been able to participate in a much larger number of EU projects from other programmes than the regional ERDF and national ESF programmes. Even though the latter are more important in terms of funding.

The most important sources are Interreg (19) and Horizon (21) projects. Smaller numbers come from LIFE (4) and EUI (2). The Interreg projects come from various Interreg programmes such as the North Sea programme, the Two Seas programme, the Dutch-Flemish cross-border programme, the Northwest Europe programme, Interreg Europe and the URBACT programme. Theme-wise they address resilience and climate adaptation, innovation and digitalisation, environmental protection, sustainable mobility and logistics, employment.

The Horizon projects in the 2014-2020 period almost all fall under the Societal Challenges objective, and an interviewee confirmed how important this objective under Horizon is for the city. In the 2021-2027 period all projects fall under Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness. Project themes are Food, climate, energy, mobility, security, culture, industry.

All 4 LIFE projects address climate change or environmental protection.

Of the 2 EUI projects one project on greening private gardens in a public-private approach is implemented at the city level. The project Bridge is part of the ITI.

Looking at the numbers in the 2014-2020 period there were 11 Interreg projects with total amount for the city of 3,7 million. There were 12 Horizon 2020 projects with a total of 4,4 million. There were also 3 LIFE projects in this period of which the contribution to the city is not known.

In the 2021-2027 period there are so far 8 Interreg projects for 1,3 million euro in total. There is one LIFE project worth 800 euro and 8 Horizon Europe project with a total amount for Rotterdam of 3,5 million. In addition, there is one EUI project at the city level worth 4,9 million.

#### **Differences between the 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 period.**

The number of projects remains fairly consistent over the two programming periods. In addition to funding, project participation is sometimes also used by the city as a testing ground for new ideas, (e.g. the city as a living lab in several Horizon projects), and as an opportunity to network and lobby with cities with similar challenges.

Still, the overall amount of EU funding received by the city is relatively small. Around 10 million in project funding per year with obvious differences per year, depending on project payments. Of this about 5 million is ESF and 5 million is other funding. Of a total municipal budget of 5 billion euro, this is close to 0 %. However, of this 5 billion, only around 400 million yearly can be invested in projects. Of 400 million, 10 million is 2,5%, which makes this contribution more impactful.

### **7.1.3 Other funding alternatives**

In addition to regular ERDF and ESF funding, ReactEU funding was added to the national ESF programme and the ERDF West Netherlands programme. In the latter 6,6 went to Rotterdam's sub-regional part and 5,5 million to the SUD ITI. This led to 2 additional, but thematically similar ESF projects at city level for 5 million in total. There were no ReactEU West Netherlands projects where the municipality was beneficiary.

Rotterdam was also direct beneficiary of 2 JTF projects, both dealing with the training and employment challenge of the green transition. However, the total contribution to the city is not yet clear.

Notably, Rotterdam also benefited from funding sources that are usually not mentioned in discussions on EU support for cities. 3 city projects received support from AMIF, 3 from Erasmus+, 3 from

Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values, 2 from the Digital Europe programme, and ELENA, Europe for Citizens, ICLEI Action Fund 2.0 and Net zero cities each supported 1 project. Especially the AMIF projects are quite substantial with 2 projects in the 2014-2020 period worth 1,4 million in total, and one project in 2021-2027 worth 1,5 million.

The majority of these projects are in the social domain and address discrimination, equality, support to asylum seekers, digital skills, health. the Net Zero Cities project is directly linked to the City Mission.

## 7.2 Funding coordination mechanism

At the level of the Rotterdam municipality, coordination of EU funds is attempted at several levels. Within the city administration there are two project development teams; one for the social domain and the other for the physical domain.

This latter team is part of the Strategy Unit of the City Development Cluster of the municipality of Rotterdam. This unit is in turn part of the staff, which means that it mainly works to serve other units. The unit has three core tasks:

- Strategy determination, which relates to processes such as future goals, process innovation, monitoring or new participation methods.
- All incoming subsidies. These are all subsidies and contributions received “with rules”. These are subsidies and special payments that must be applied for and accounted for.
- Management of the West Netherlands programme, including the ITI in Rotterdam South and JTF Rijnmond and IJmond.

“All incoming subsidies” includes both applying for subsidies (national, provincial, European) and coordinating the implementation of European cooperation projects. The reason for applying for a subsidy can be either demand-driven (from within the organisation) or opportunity-driven (an opportunity is identified).

There is a professional team that is skilled at managing funds based on criteria requirements and organising accountability processes.

This team consists of approximately 15 people, of whom 2-3 are specialised in subsidy applications. Three employees form a kind of PMO (Project Management Office) for European cooperation projects.

European projects can also be applied for independently by other departments in the organisation based on their specific role. There is no coordination involved. However, the Strategy Department has a core team of specialists who are skilled in exploring, applying for, implementing and accounting for projects and who can always serve as backup. In practice, the Strategy Department often takes the lead in project applications for EU or LIFE. Other departments often submit Inter-reg or Horizon applications.

In addition, a separate team in the Social Development cluster is responsible for project applications in the social domain. The department heads meet regularly, but not specifically to discuss project coordination.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Interview Head of strategy unit, 11 June 2025

The aim is to achieve synergy between municipal or regional instruments and European funding opportunities. This is often achieved through co-financing from municipal instruments or by using different forms of financing in different phases of a project. This synergy is more easily accomplished when the city is actively involved in the design and implementation of EU programmes. Therefore the city values being an MA or “intermediate body” of the ERDF and JTF. Examples where this has been successful are:

- **Bridge project**

The Bridge project focuses on Rotterdam South. It started as the URBACT project My Generation at Work<sup>40</sup> which focused on what cities can do to increase and promote the employability and employment of young people. Subsequently the UIA project BRIDGE - Building the Right Investments for Delivering a Growing Economy - the city of Rotterdam aimed to ensure that by 2020, 50% of secondary vocational training students in Rotterdam South will have chosen a career in one of the major growth sectors, thus reducing the gap between school leavers and the labour market. This project was then supported by the ERDF West Netherlands programme in 2014-2020 as part of the SUD ITI, and again in the 2021-2027 period.

A similar synergy between municipal and EU funding exists at the Learning Practice Centres.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://urbact.eu/articles/rotterdams-journey-urbact-urban-innovative-actions-and-beyond-story-city-love-europe>

- **Innovation Quarter**

The Innovation Quarter has its own network of innovative companies. The municipality is able to match the types of activity and stages of innovation well with European funding opportunities. The primary goal of the Innovation Quarter is not to match European opportunities, but to further develop companies. There is good synergy between the goals of the Innovation Quarter and the available European funding.

Rotterdam also uses other ERDF-supported financial instruments. For example for support to impact investors and area development through the SOFIE fund.

## 8 Recovery and Resilience Plan

As a unicum of post-COVID-19, the country's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) has represented an alternative (or complementary) fund for cities and territories. This section explores how the RRF has been conceptualised and implemented in the Netherlands and whether Rotterdam has reflected the RRP priorities in its development documents and benefits from its funding scheme.

### 8.1 The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan

The process of establishing the Dutch RRF plan is described as a “poor example” of intergovernmental cooperation by all interviewees. Factors that contributed to this poor cooperation included time pressure and the rapid establishment of groups within the Ministry of Finance. Initially, the Ministry of Economic Affairs was involved, but later the Ministry of Finance took the lead. A decision was made to finance existing projects rather than set up new ones. The fact that only national projects were given a European label in practice meant that lower authorities were sidelined.

The RRF plan itself contains a chapter on consultation that describes a consultation process with other authorities, social partners and organisations committed to gender equality and equal opportunities for all. The steps taken to involve other authorities included a technical briefing, a meeting with experts from cities, provinces and waterboards, and a meeting at political level involving ministers, mayors and aldermen<sup>41</sup>. This chapter does not detail major changes to the plan following these consultations, other than a reduction in overall funds.

The very limited consultation and the one-sided focus on rapid implementation led to dissatisfaction among local authorities and even resulted in a meeting with the Minister of Finance. However, this did not yield much result.<sup>42</sup> In its interview the Alderman of Rotterdam is very negative about the intention of the Commission to use the RRF as a blueprint for future Cohesion Policy due to its speed and performance orientation. Firstly, the design of the National RRF plan took rather long, 2 years, and was in the end mostly about supporting existing national programmes. In addition, accountability for projects is almost the same as under cohesion funds because there is still a need to proof expenses. The fact that the absorption of RRF is high is due to the fact that the RRF funds existing projects retroactively. This is indeed fast, but also has questionable EU added value.<sup>43</sup>

Some of the lessons learned and consequences were an increase in the implementation burden for existing national projects due to European accountability, recognition by the Ministry of Finance that the approach was not optimal, and greater understanding of the complexity of EU funds among various parties.

**Table 8.1**  
**The Governance of Recovery and Resilience Plan in the Netherlands**

Name of the actor	Level	Responsibility
Ministry of Finance	National	Design and management of RRF

<sup>41</sup> Government of the Netherlands. (2022a)

<sup>42</sup> Interview Urban Envoy, 30 April 2025

<sup>43</sup> Interview Vice-Mayor of Rotterdam, 11 June 2025

Source: author's own elaboration

## 8.2 Coherence with Recovery and Resilience Plan

The Dutch Recovery and Resilience Plan has 6 priority missions. Each priority has components and measures. Measure can be investments on reforms. Here is an overview of the priorities and components:

Priority 1: Promoting green transition

Component 1.1: Accelerating climate and energy transition

Component 1.2: Tackling nitrogen

Priority 2: Accelerating digital transformation

Component 2.1: Promoting innovative technologies and digital skills

Component 2.2: Making mobility future-proof

Component 2.3: Future-proofing IT in government

Priority 3: Improving the housing market and making the built environment more sustainable

Component 3.1: Improving the housing market

Component 3.2: Making the built environment more sustainable

Priority 4: Strengthening the labour market, pensions and future-oriented education

Component 4.1: Strengthening the labour market and good pensions

Component 4.2: Making education and research future-proof

Priority 5: Strengthening the public health sector and pandemic preparedness

Component 5.1: Strengthening the public health sector and pandemic preparedness

Priority 6: Tackling aggressive tax planning and money laundering

Component 6.1: Tackling aggressive tax planning and money laundering

On paper there is quite some overlap between the 6 missions from the RRF and the main policy documents from the city of Rotterdam. Only priority 6 is not part of either the Coalition Agreement or Environment Vision. Accelerating climate and energy transition; Improving the housing market and making the built environment more sustainable; Making mobility future-proof; Strengthening the labour market, are all high priorities for the city.

However, in practice the links are less clear and less visible. First, because the RRF in the Netherlands funds already existing national programmes. Sometimes such programmes also benefited cities, for example a national programme to prepare brownfields for housing development. So instead of receiving national co-funding for such projects, the city now receives the same amount of money but from the RRF. Project managers often did not even know that the source of the funding had changed. This led to low visibility of RRF support.

A second reason is that the focus on reducing the national budget deficit and supporting national programmes led to support for projects where cities have no role to play. For example, the city had pointed to the need for the energy renovation of school buildings that are under the responsibility

of the city. Instead, the focus went to the energy renovation of social real estate (measure 3.2II which included school buildings financed by the national government<sup>44</sup>.

**Table 8.2**  
**Coherence with the Recovery and Resilience Plan<sup>45</sup>**

Tool	Recovery and Resilience Plan Missions					
	Mission 1	Mission 2	Mission 3	Mission 4	Mission 5	Mission 6
RRF	Green transition	Digital transformation	Improving the housing market	Strengthening the labour market	Strengthening public health	Tackling aggressive tax planning
Environmental vision	x		x		x	
Coalition Agreement	x	x	x	x	x	
NPRZ	x	x	x	x	x	
Urban Implementation Plan	x			x		
BoTu strategy	x			x		

Source: author's own elaboration

### 8.3 Recovery and Resilience Fund

There is no list of RRF supported projects available, but there is a list of the 100 biggest beneficiaries of RRF funding by measure. The most up-to-date list takes into account payments until 1 December 2024.

Rotterdam is mentioned 4 times in this top 100 list. Rotterdam is a recipient for the measures regarding the housing stimulus package, the nature programme, Investment subsidy for sustainable energy and energy saving, and the Subsidy scheme for sustainable social real estate.

The housing stimulus package is by far the largest contribution so far with 40.765.857 euro<sup>46</sup>.

In September 2019, the Housing Stimulus package (Wbi) was announced in the budget memorandum (Miljoenennota 2020) as part of a package of measures to stimulate the construction of affordable housing. On 11 May 2020, the decision containing rules on the provision of a specific grant to municipalities for the purpose of accelerating the construction of affordable housing in a high-quality living environment was published in the Government Gazette.

<sup>44</sup> Interview Head of strategy unit, 11 June 2025

<sup>45</sup> Government of the Netherlands (2022a)

<sup>46</sup> Ministry of Finance of the Netherlands (2025)

The Wbi aims to accelerate the development of projects with a substantial number of affordable homes by subsidising part of the unprofitable shortfall. The instrument focuses on reducing the unprofitable peak that arises because land revenues are insufficient to cover the necessary public investments. Municipalities can receive contributions for five physical interventions, namely measures aimed at:

1. infrastructural access/accessibility,
2. soil remediation,
3. reducing nitrogen deposition,
4. relocating nuisance activities and
5. (re)designing public space.

The Nature Programme has disbursed 1.026.600 euro to Rotterdam. The Nature Programme is part of the structural approach to nitrogen, which aims to reduce nitrogen pollution in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has opted for two strategies to tackle nitrogen pollution:

- Track 1 comprises measures in the agricultural, mobility and industrial sectors aimed at reducing nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands.
- Track 2 comprises measures aimed at nature restoration and improvement, including the Nature Programme.

The Nature Programme involves an additional investment of EUR 2.85 billion in nature restoration and development over the period 2021-2030. The programme is the joint responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and the provinces. An important main theme of the programme is to contribute to creating conditions for a favourable or improved conservation status for all species and habitats under the Birds and Habitats Directives (VHR). The focus is on overburdened nitrogen-sensitive habitats and species habitats. This favourable conservation status is a situation in which nature flourishes. This is a long-term ambition that can only be achieved if, in addition to existing nature conservation efforts, work is also done to reduce nitrogen deposition and make the environment more nature-inclusive. It is expected that these additional measures will enable 70% of the target to be achieved by 2030.

Both the Subsidy scheme for sustainable social real estate (40.350 euro disbursed) and the investment subsidy for sustainable energy and energy saving (ISDE) with 21.515 euro disbursed, are part of the measure 'make the built environment more sustainable'. The objective is to make the built environment more sustainable, to achieve CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in line with European and Dutch climate targets, and to reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

The main objective of the subsidy scheme for sustainable social real estate is to encourage owners of social real estate to invest in sustainability measures to improve energy performance and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The new scheme reimburses part of the project costs of the sustainability measures.

The ISDE scheme is to encourage the installation and use of hybrid heat pumps. These hybrid heat pumps ensure a significant reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions compared to the use of a standard high-efficiency boiler. This investment will run from 2022 to 2024<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Government of the Netherlands (2022a)

## 9 Challenges and policy recommendations

### 9.1 Local Level

The city level district/neighbourhood level are the two territorial scales of this analysis. This is also the level where most of the decisions are taken. Even more so because it is the city that is MA of the regional ERDF programme, is an important beneficiary of ESF and IB of the regional Just Transition plans. The city is well organized and has administrative capacity. The city has applied several innovations linked to the management of CP: Urban CLLD, Urban advisory group, One-stop shop, financial instruments, Project offices.

#### 9.1.1 Challenges

A) Despite the fact that the city administration is well organized, even for Rotterdam it is not easy to set up multi-thematic projects. The identified challenge is not the structure of the organization. Both social and physical infrastructure clusters work well together. Rather it is an addition of limited resources. For each project it is needed to find the civil servants with thematic knowledge and time to provide input to the project and for co-funding to be available. For multi-thematic projects involving several units, these challenges multiply with staff and co-funding needed from different parts of the organization. When multi-thematic projects involve more than one funding source this also complicates project management due to different rules and timelines.

B) Due to the limited financial contribution of CP to the city and also resulting from negotiations with the European Commission, Rotterdam has concentrated this support in the SUD ITI, alongside the much larger NPRZ strategy for this area. This focus on neighbourhoods experiencing multiple challenges already exists since the '90. However, the city challenges and thematic funding opportunities of the EU programmes are larger. Especially since the city now also has a direct role in, and access to the JTF. In addition, beneficiaries often question the territorial focus, especially when projects are more about employment, training and economic development. A territorial focus is easier with projects that address the physical environment. The city ensures that EU projects outside of the SUD ITI are also linked to city priorities, however this is less visible.

#### 9.1.2 Policy recommendations

A) Rotterdam does not have a co-financing fund for projects. The Hague and North-Holland in the West Netherlands programme do. Such a fund typically can be used to help cover 25% of project costs would be especially beneficial to help support more thematically integrated projects because of their more complex cofinancing needs. Such a fund would need to be set up at the start of the next programming period for projects to use it. However, political support is needed and this is not guaranteed. Because despite the identified challenge for more complex projects, the available EU CP financing is generally used. A first step might therefore be to explore the options and support for such a fund in the organization and learn from the experience of The Hague and North-Holland.

B) When future CP priorities and frameworks are known it might be a good moment to evaluate whether Rotterdam South should still be the focus for CP the same way as it is now. One option might be to broaden the CLLD approach to focus on neighbourhoods that are ready for it. This could generalize the more direct involvement of citizens in local EU projects. Environment programmes,

as implementation of the Environment Vision, and potentially a strategic labour market policy if ESF is included, could be the basis of an alternative Urban Implementation Plan that encompasses more of Rotterdam's EU funding priorities.

## 9.2 Regional Level

The case study of Rotterdam did not involve the province because Rotterdam's ITI is within the city boundaries. In the West Netherlands programme the provinces are partners, but they do not fulfill a role as MA. This is neither the case in ESF. In the JTF programme, a vice-mayor of Rotterdam and a regional minister of the Province of South Holland are the rotating presidencies of the regional steering group. In addition, Rotterdam's vice-minister is also member of the Monitoring Committee of the national JTF programme. In practice, many projects around transitions, both in the ERDF West Netherlands and JTF plans, use extensive ecosystems of stakeholders. For the energy transition in the port area these are for examples companies, port authorities, educational institutions, research institutes. Even though a project might physically be in the Rotterdam municipality, often many stakeholders come from the region.

### 9.2.1 Challenges

C) Regional stakeholders are important for projects and Rotterdam. Some regional stakeholders like the waterboards could be more active partners in projects on resilience and nature-based solutions. A Regional Coordination meeting on EU Funds (Regionaal Afstemingsoverleg Europese Fondsen – RAEF) in which the municipalities and the Province South-Holland participate exists. This is the forum where the interlinkages of these ecosystems could be discussed. However, the RAEF does not meet frequently and generally does not discuss in strategic way these interconnections and future priorities.

### 9.2.2 Policy recommendations

C) The RAEF is potentially a good platform to discuss interconnections of partner ecosystems between the city and the province. Strategic discussions on priorities could potentially lead to more impactful projects where all strategic partners are on board. Because Rotterdam itself is part of the RAEF it could be the city itself to propose such a discussion.

## 9.3 National Level

Even though the city is the MA of the regional ERDF programme, the national government remains an important player in cohesion policy. First, because a national ministry is MA of the national ESF and JTF programmes. Second, because a national ministry also leads the design and implementation of the RRF, in which cities potentially could have played a role. Thirdly, the national level takes political decisions on the funding and scope of cohesion policy in the Council.

### 9.3.1 Challenges

D) In programme management the national government plays various roles. This goes from a facilitating role for provinces in Interreg programmes, to exclusive programme manager in the case of RRF. The national level role in ESF and JTF is somewhere in between, where cooperation between the state and the city is good in general, but sometimes decisions are taken at state level with which the city disagrees. One example was the decision by the state to stop the ESF/ERDF integration in the SUD ITIs.

E) Apart from the different national roles in programme management, the level of multilevel cooperation in designing programmes also varies. The partnership principle in CP programmes is generally well respected. However, in the RRF consultation and cooperation was minimal even though many priorities directly affect cities.

F) Finally, the wish by the national government to have a role in CP programmes can lead to suboptimal solutions from a programme management perspective. For example, ReactEU was simply added to existing ERDF programmes under a new priority which was easy to implement. On the contrary, JTF was set up as a new programme with new structures. It could also have been implemented as an ITI under existing ERDF programmes with far easier management as a result.

### 9.3.2 Policy recommendations

D) State actors should allow time for policy integration (ESF/ERDF) to work at the local level, because it is there that challenges meet and need integrated solutions. Thematic integration takes time and has some upfront costs in additional coordination and learning curve. The national level should be aware of this, facilitate this integration and not too soon conclude that it is not working. Similar state support or encouragement should also apply to EAFRD where there are links with urban farming, healthy food, short food chains that now risk being underexploited. The VNG of which Rotterdam is a member should continue to underline with the national government the importance of integrated solutions to city challenges and ask that EU programmes can be organized in such a way that they can support this.

E) In the Dutch tradition of intergovernmental cooperation, the state should always involve cities or city representatives in new EU programmes. That should not be a 'new battle' for every programme or programming period, but an automated reflex. The elaborated multi-sectoral and multi-level cooperation with the BNC working group should ensure that these principles are applied in all shared EU programmes, irrespective if they fall under CP or not. Both the representatives of the local and regional governments (VNG, IPO) and the Urban Envoy should continuously stress this point. Also EU CP should keep and enforce the partnership principle. In CP, a policy for regional and urban development, the main relationship should be EU – regions/cities, with a more facilitating role for national governments. The EU should not limit the partnership principle to CP but expect member states to apply this principle in all shared EU funding programmes.

F) The national government should trust their provinces and cities on the topics of sustainable regional development and EU programme management and play as much as possible a facilitating role. When programme management is at the scale of the regional ecosystems it directly aims to support, the regional level can then decide on the most effective management solution. Again it would be the role of the regional MA's, Urban Envoy and local and regional representative organisations to bring this message to the national government, and for the national government to listen.

## 9.4 EU Level

CP being EU policy, the EU level is very important for proposing the scope, principles, topics, level of funding, instruments and rules for cohesion policy and other EU policies and funding opportunities.

### 9.4.1 Challenges

G) Specifically for CP, limited funding for more developed regions, thematic concentration requirements, links to Country-specific recommendations restrict the scope of funding for the city.

The city indicated that, although relatively limited in amount, for certain priorities EU funding is very important. And EU projects also help the city to build (international) networks, learn and be directly involved in improving the EU implementing regulations. There is pressure to use CP as a funding pot for a wide range of EU priorities. However, sustainable economic development is a long-term goal and cities and regions are crucial actors in regional innovation ecosystems. CP should continue to support that with appropriate means and regulations that are fit for purpose.

H) In general, the proliferation of shared-management programmes, often organized thematically and each with its different rules, timelines and competent authorities, complicates the task of cities to apply for funding and manage projects. Especially if the city wants to work in an integrated way. Such proliferation of programmes not only complicates project development but also programme management. Often, European messaging on cross-sectoral integrated development and simplification does not align with EU rules and regulations that are finally implemented.

#### 9.4.2 Policy recommendations

G) The EU should keep CP funding accessible to all regions and cities, also the more developed ones. There should also be a minimum amount available to compensate for the transaction costs that EU projects entail and programme and project rules should be as simple as possible. If not, this will limit these cities potential to tackle EU challenges, their access to the EU institutions, European networks and city experiences. The EU should recognise the important role cities play in fostering regional innovation ecosystems, which in turn are crucial for Europe's economic competitiveness. CP budget should not be used to address urgent crises, but keep the focus on themes (innovation, green transition) that are relevant for such long-term sustainable regional/local development in which cities and provinces are key players. Key success factors are stakeholder cooperation and ecosystem formation. Such public-private partnerships at local, regional and national level should be encouraged by the EU.

H) The EU should stop making a new programme for each new policy theme, but use capable MAs with experience in setting up, managing programmes and working with beneficiaries to include new funding streams and priorities. For example, the Just Transition plans could have been ITIs within existing ERDF programmes. The EU shouldn't give up on thematic integration, because this is important for cities where integrated challenges meet (ESF, EARDF). When this thematic integration is pushed from the EU level, the EU structures and fund rules should be conducive to this. The EU should listen to cities and MAs to design support measures that work on the ground, be strict on principles such as partnerships, but provide for flexible regional and local implementation.

## 10 Conclusion

The Rotterdam case study demonstrates how a major European city can leverage EU Cohesion Policy instruments to address persistent socio-economic disparities while navigating the constraints and opportunities of multilevel governance. Rotterdam's dual role as Managing Authority of the West Netherlands ERDF programme and Intermediate Body for the Just Transition Fund (JTF) positions it uniquely within the Dutch and European landscape. It is a model of administrative maturity and policy entrepreneurship that nonetheless illustrates systemic challenges in the alignment between urban needs and EU policy frameworks.

### A. Strategic Use of Limited EU Funding

One of the most striking findings is the strategic role EU funds play in Rotterdam despite their limited financial weight. EU Cohesion Policy and other EU programmes represent less than 0.3% of the city's total budget and about 2.5% of Rotterdam's yearly investible budget. Yet through careful targeting—particularly within the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) in Rotterdam South—this funding supports critical transitions in employment, education, and the green transition, especially through the creation of networks and ecosystems. However, the focus on one area in the city raises the question of strategic alignment of EU investments outside of this area. Moving forward, the municipal Environmental Vision and its Environmental programmes could form the framework for a future city-wide Urban Implementation Plan, possibly in combination with a more generalised use of the CLLD instrument in focus neighbourhoods.

### B. Institutional Capacity and Governance Innovation

Rotterdam's internal governance arrangements are a major factor in its effectiveness. The existence of two dedicated project offices for EU funding—separately addressing social and physical domains—allows for tailored support. Yes, despite this strong governance designing and implementing complex multi-thematic projects is a challenge due to staff and co-financing issues. In the 2014–2020 period the integration of ERDF and ESF in the SUD ITI failed to produce joint projects due to institutional and procedural misalignments. While Rotterdam has learned from this experience, the dismantling of this integration in the current period (2021–2027) represents a missed opportunity. Future programming cycles should re-explore mechanisms for functional integration across policy domains, particularly when addressing complex, cross-cutting urban issues like resilience, inclusion, and energy transition.

Furthermore, Rotterdam's Urban Advisory Group (SAG) and the Local Action Group (LAG) for CLLD in the BoTu neighbourhood show promising practices in local democracy and stakeholder engagement. These mechanisms not only improve project relevance but also deepen the legitimacy and local ownership of EU-supported actions. Nevertheless, the scale of these efforts remains relatively limited, and more systematic use of the CLLD instrument in the ITI area could further embed EU Cohesion Policy into the everyday governance of the city.

### C. National and EU-Level Coordination Deficits

While Rotterdam demonstrates exemplary city-level governance, the case also reveals tensions in the broader governance of EU funding. The city's limited role in the design and implementation of the Netherlands' Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) highlights tendencies of centralisation at national level. Despite formal consultations, cities were ultimately sidelined, resulting in low visibility and limited tailoring of RRP-funded projects to local needs. Similar dynamics are evident in the decision to discontinue the ERDF-ESF integration in ITIs—a move made at national level despite local actors recognising its potential value.

At the EU level, Rotterdam's experience reinforces the need for synergies among EU funding streams, and between EU funding streams, long term city objectives and local, regional and national funding programmes. The proliferation of EU programmes, each with distinct rules, objectives, and management authorities, creates a fragmented and administratively burdensome funding landscape. This complexity not only deters smaller municipalities and organisations from applying but also hinders cities like Rotterdam from using EU support effectively in pursuing more integrated, long-term strategies. EU institutions should reduce these barriers by aligning rules across funds, expanding the use of simplified cost options, and enabling multi-fund programmes wherever thematically justified.

#### **D. The Value of Networking and Strategic Positioning**

Rotterdam's active participation in EU networks such as Eurocities, ICLEI, and the Resilient Cities Network significantly enhances its capacity to influence EU policy and secure funding. The city's Brussels presence and internal EU coordination mechanisms are examples of how cities can professionalise their European engagement. Rotterdam not only contributes to shaping EU urban agendas but also acts as a model and mentor for other cities in project development and implementation. This role should be further institutionalised and supported at both national and EU levels, ensuring that city experiences are systematically channelled into the design of new policies and programmes.

#### **E. Recommendations for the Future Cohesion Policy Framework**

Based on the Rotterdam case, several forward-looking recommendations can be made. First, EU Cohesion Policy must maintain its accessibility to cities in more developed regions. Excluding them or reducing their funding undermines the EU's capacity to deliver on green, digital, and inclusive transitions that require urban leadership. Second, the partnership principle must be robustly enforced, not only in programme management but also in the strategic design of new initiatives such as the Social Climate Fund or successor instruments to the RRF. Third, the EU should reward institutional innovation, such as Rotterdam's use of revolving social impact funds and community-led planning models, with enhanced visibility and replication mechanisms.

In conclusion, the Rotterdam case illustrates both the strengths and systemic limitations of how Cohesion Policy is currently implemented in urban areas. It showcases the ability of local governments to deliver targeted, innovative, and participatory projects within constrained financial and regulatory frameworks. However, to fully unlock the potential of cities in achieving the EU's long-term goals, deeper integration, decentralisation, better synergies and simplification are essential. The next programming period represents an opportunity to embed these lessons into a more effective, responsive, and territorially sensitive Cohesion Policy.

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Interview 2 - EU coordinator for the social development cluster, 9 May 2025

Interview 3 – Head of Managing Authority West Netherlands, 12 May 2025

Interview 4 - Neighbourhood manager for Feijenoord, 14 May 2025

Interview 5 - Strategic advisor, 21 May 2025

Interview 6 – EU representative municipality of Rotterdam, 6 June 2025

Interview 7 – Head of strategy unit, 11 June 2025

Interview 8 - Deputy Mayor and Alderman for Ports, Economy, Hospitality and Administration in Rotterdam, written interview, 11 June 2025

Interactive Session 1 - Hearing Rotterdam, 21 February 2025

Interactive Session 2 - Policy lab Rotterdam, 1 July 2025





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#### Disclaimer

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