

## PRELIMINARY DRAFT COMMON WORK PROGRAMME 2017-2020

Over the years, the Benelux cooperation has gathered momentum and achieved results benefiting citizens and companies alike. In recent years we have worked on improving personal and labour mobility, a more efficient use of road transport, the development of alternative energy sources and good cooperation between our security services. The countries should continue making innovative choices and continue to look for solutions to practical bottlenecks experienced by citizens and companies.

The societal, economic and security challenges are great. They go beyond the capacity of the individual member states to tackle these themselves. A regional partnership such as the Benelux Union can develop and offer solutions. By working together within the Benelux, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg strengthen their position in the EU. Moreover, in certain cases the Benelux Union can go beyond the EU. In the past our countries have made use of this possibility on numerous occasions.

Every four years, the Benelux Union establishes a common work programme containing the strategic framework and the cooperation priorities. These priorities are then converted into actions and projects through annual plans.

For the period 2017-2020 our governments established realistic and pragmatic objectives. Cooperation in the Benelux Union is geared towards removing barriers and obstacles, creating economies of scale for the three countries and supporting consultation platforms between the countries following the example of the expertise and knowledge networks.

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

The coming four years the Benelux Union aims to further dedicate itself to the strengthening of the internal market and to enhance security cooperation. Following the climate summit in Paris in 2015, it goes without saying that new and innovative measures must pass a sustainability impact assessment. Our countries must continue to adjust to climate change and to pursue a low-carbon society. Attention for sustainability is an important condition to further shape the strengthening of the internal market and the security cooperation.

Moreover, in view of the Benelux countries' socio-economic challenges, we must strengthen the social fabric. The Benelux is also committed to promoting equal chances for all citizens. Therefore it is important to continue to promote social cohesion and social inclusion of everyone.

Water, wind, sound and light know no borders. Therefore the Benelux Union is collaborating with other international organisations, states and federated entities in a number of fields. In the framework of energy and road transport, the Benelux Union has been working with neighbouring countries, including France and Germany, for many years now. Since 2008, there is a fruitful cooperation with the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which was laid down in a joint political declaration. This cooperation takes place in areas such as energy, environment, space and security. Cooperation also takes place with other federated entities or international organisations (OECD, Grande Région, etc.).

## **1. Cross-border labour market**

Poor knowledge of the differences in regulation on both sides of the border remains an obstacle in the development of a cross-border labour market. In view of this, the free provision of services across borders also meets barriers limiting the freedom of choice of citizens and companies. Along the borders opportunities are missed, for example to fill vacancies. The Benelux countries aim to make the labour and service market 'border neutral'. The objective is to promote synergies and reciprocal recognition in order to stimulate cross-border activities.

Objectives:

1. Disclosure of information concerning social rights and taxation for employees and employers on both sides of the border
2. Increasing individual mobility of employees through automatic recognition of diplomas, portability of professional qualifications and stimulating cross-border internships
3. Cooperating more to stimulate collaborations and synergies, especially in the field of cross-border healthcare.

## **2. An internal market without borders**

The Benelux was founded with the ambition to become a unified market. This objective was adopted by the European Union. However, many obstacles continue to exist. Partly thanks to article 350 TFEU, the Benelux countries continue to pursue efforts to remove the internal borders.

Special attention goes to the circular economy, striving to more efficiently use resources in all stages of the life cycle of products, goods and services, to minimise the impact on the environment and to also improve the well-being of individuals. With this new model, growth can be created and innovation and research can be stimulated.

Objectives:

1. Eliminating administrative barriers for cross-border trade and the creation of one retail market for the consumer
2. Making cross-border bidding for governmental contracts more accessible
3. Improvement of the cross-border access to (digital) goods and services for citizens and companies, to reach a cross-border environment which stimulates the development of innovative networks and services
4. Promoting initiatives and cooperation in the field of the circular economy, for example in the field of waste management and recovery of materials. Focus on innovation by stimulating smart product design which is repairable and recyclable.

### **3. Sustainable transport**

In a densely populated area with a lot of economic activity such as the Benelux, it is crucial to develop new and future-proof modes of transport. There is a need to commit to an optimal modal shift to ensure the area remains a pleasant place to live for both citizens and companies.

The Benelux has developed into the logistics hub and gateway to Europe. The accompanying economic growth and wealth can only be insured if our countries continue to innovate and act in close coordination within a sustainable and climate-conscious framework. All modes of transport should be used in the most optimal way. Moreover, the Benelux countries should continue to pay attention to all kinds of passenger transport, especially cross-border passenger transport. By focusing on multi- and inter-modal transport, both the economic growth and the mobility of persons can be further stimulated.

Objectives:

1. Realisation of a sustainable modal shift in goods and passenger transport
2. **Make public transport more attractive in the border regions** and eliminate barriers concerning pricing, service provision and infrastructure
3. Make transport by inland waterways and railways more competitive and attractive
4. Achieve climate objectives in the field of alternative fuels
5. Reduce companies' administrative burden by making use of digitisation of transport documents and customs formalities
6. Use smart transport systems.

### **4. A future-proof energy market**

The proper functioning of the energy market and the security of supply cannot be ensured by the countries alone. With the Penta cooperation, the Benelux countries assume a leading role in Europe in connecting the national energy markets across borders. In doing so, the focus on the retention of the security of supply and the changing relationship between consumers and producers is further reinforced.

Objectives:

1. Deepening and widening of one Benelux internal energy market with the neighbouring countries as a building block of the Energy Union
2. Increasing the security of supply through cooperation in transport, capacity and storage
3. Promote the use of renewable energy and integrating this at market rates
4. Being a laboratory for smart applications of the new energy market
5. Together tackling the depletion of local gas reserves
6. Together tackling the risks of climate change and aid the transition to a low-carbon economy.

## **5. A safe living environment**

The long-standing cooperation and the trust built up between the security services ensure excellent results in the field of operational cooperation, law enforcement and during urgent interventions on both sides of the border. The societal context is always changing and new types of crime are emerging. The Benelux countries aim to further optimise their cooperation and extend it to other cooperation areas.

Objectives:

1. Broaden the cooperation to the judicial services
2. Tackling terrorism and radicalisation together
3. Fight traffickers, in particular by focusing on the victims of trafficking
4. Sharing judicial and police information between the security services concerned
5. A partnership with local governments to fight criminal phenomena faster through an administrative approach to tackling crime
6. Make arrangements and share good practices regarding the protection of personal data in order to guarantee the right to protection of individual privacy on the one hand and to fight crime on the other.

## **6. Common action during crises and disasters**

Major disasters or crisis situations know no borders. For the Benelux countries these borders are very close. Moreover, climate change can lead to large-scale disasters in which the Benelux countries will have to cooperate closely to prevent and fight them together.

Objectives:

1. Focusing on risk identification and analysis together
2. Operational cooperation during interventions so that coordinated mutual assistance can be given (emergency services, ambulances, etc.)
3. Make cross-border agreements to prevent and fight large-scale climate and natural disasters together
4. Cooperation to protect the digital infrastructure
5. Continue cooperation in the field of food safety

## **7. Prevent fraud**

Fraudsters make use of the borders to circumvent the control of inspection services and the judicial authorities. Their actions represent a threat to fair competition and affect public finances. In the following years, the Benelux countries will continue to focus on the common combat of all (large-scale) tax and social fraud, but also social dumping – which leads to the exploitation of employees and undermines the social system – and more specific fraud that companies and persons are confronted with.

Objectives:

1. Further intensify the common fight against tax fraud and share best practices
2. Improve fair competition between companies by intensifying the common combat against fraud and social dumping
3. Cooperating against healthcare fraud
4. Cooperating in the field of protection of companies and persons
5. Making arrangements with a view to enforce European regulations and improve information exchange.

## **8. A well thought-out migration policy**

The Benelux countries are leading in the field of free movement of people. The Schengen Agreement of 1985 was a milestone. We cannot stop there, in light of the challenges for people and society.

Objectives:

1. Improving free movement of people at a regional and European level
2. Cooperate in the field of integration and participation of all inhabitants
3. Make agreements on visa policy and readmission.