



DUTCH EMPLOYERS COOPERATION PROGRAMME

**DEVELOPMENT OF ECOSYSTEMS. BETTER DO IT  
TOGETHER**



The Hague, Eindhoven  
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## Introduction

DECP strengthens employers' organisations in developing countries with the aim of contributing to improving the business climate. Social and economic aspects go hand in hand. The emphasis is increasingly shifting from the national level to sectors and value chains. By working together in clusters – which are also called ecosystems when they have reached full maturity – all participants can benefit. But clusters do not come about by themselves. There must be a certain urgency and mutual trust. DECP applies, among other things, the method of social dialogue to bring parties together.

The Netherlands has many partnerships that have already proven their value for the parties involved. To be able to share experiences, I visited Brainport Industries and Mikrocentrum. Both are clear examples of organisations in which the participants work together and benefit from doing so. It is not without reason that the Brainport region has a leading position in the field of high-tech systems and technology in healthcare, chip production, nanotechnology, modern automotive technology and agrifood. Although both organisations are based in the Eindhoven region, they are active both nationally and beyond the national borders and share their experiences with other regions and partnerships.

## Brainport Industries

I am enthusiastically received by John Blankendaal, managing director of Brainport Industries. Brainport Industries is a cooperative of approximately 110 leading suppliers of advanced technical components and systems to high-tech machine builders in the Netherlands and (far) beyond. John's office is on the Brainport Industries Campus, an ultramodern complex located next to Eindhoven Airport and surrounded by greenery. “Companies only want to invest in collaboration if it benefits them,” John begins. “Brainport Industries is all about technology, people and market. This is what the member companies have in common. By executing innovation programs together, for example, we accelerate time-to-market, which is a necessity to stay ahead of international competition. Themes include 3D printing, vehicles powered by solar energy, data processing and artificial intelligence. We innovate together with the vertical education and training chain.

## Technology, people and market

We are located on the Brainport Industries Campus together with about 50 other organisations – both manufacturing companies and educational institutions. We should be able to manufacture what is devised by researchers and developers. This makes the Brainport Industries Campus the face of the

high-tech manufacturing industry. An international campus development in the heart of Brainport Eindhoven where top technology, education, government and high-quality facilities come together under one roof. Because technical schools are located in the same complex as companies, they can use equipment and tools from those companies.



*John Blankendaal: Entrepreneurial engine to turn everybody into a winner*

Experts from those companies cross the corridor to give a guest lecture or provide a group assignment. Students have no trouble finding an internship that matches their level. As a result, they are almost guaranteed to find a job after their studies.” “But something so impressive could not have come about by itself,” I say to John. “Certainly not. There must be a booster, the engine of the process that brings people together.

## **Sense of urgency and trusting others**

The beginning is informal. You have to encourage the strong believers and early adopters to carry out a first project together. That driver must be enterprising. It also has to deliver quickly because entrepreneurs don't pay for making plans, but for visible results.” “What does it take to get through the first stage?” I asked. John answers spontaneously and passionately: “In any

case, a sense of urgency must be experienced. If we don't do anything, we'll miss the boat. There must also be trust in the other, dealing with the uncertainty of whether the other person will benefit more than you.



*Excellently equipped technical education under the same roof*

Thirty years ago, for example, it was unthinkable to invest together in further training of staff. Your best employee might just run away. Then you've lost your investment. Now the attitude is: every employer in technology continuously invests in lifelong learning. Yes, you lose people, but you also gain others in whom other companies have invested."

## **The government likes to share ideas and participate with us**

"Is the Brainport Industries formula successful? "John doesn't hesitate for a moment. "We have never increased the dues. That's because we had 50 affiliated companies at the start, and now there are 110. We initiate our joint programs ourselves with the necessary entrepreneurship. And the government – particularly at the provincial level – likes to think along with us. We provide employment, contribute to excellent up-to-date education, and strengthen the regional economy through our scale and innovations. That way everyone is a winner."

Inspired by John's enthusiasm, I drive over to the new home of Mikrocentrum just a few kilometres away. Until a few years ago, this organisation was located on the edge of the city centre of Eindhoven. Now, along the ring road, it is easily accessible for both cars and guests traveling by public transport. And, just as important, the spacious facilities fulfil all the wishes of 2021, including being able to meet with each other while taking into account COVID measures.

## Mikrocentrum

Bert-Jan Woertman recently became the general manager of Mikrocentrum. However, he has a long history in the region and like no other is familiar with connecting parties that can reinforce each other. At Mikrocentrum he is like a fish in water. “We have focused on three pillars within the field of technology for over fifty years: educate, meet and do business. For example, we are a partner for workers in technology who want to improve their skills, as well as those who just want to anticipate innovations.



*Bert-Jan Woertman: together we create the technology of the future*

With 170 training courses, we can fulfil almost any training request – theoretical, practical and online, from plastics and mould technology, precision and mechanical engineering to materials science and health technology. Moreover, skills such as project management and leadership in technology also have a place. In addition, we offer dozens of trade fairs, business events and theme meetings each year. Knowledge sharing and connecting are always central. With dozens of meeting moments per year, technology entrepreneurs have the opportunity to meet, get to know each other and make agreements about collaboration in any form.

It's a breeding ground for innovation. The solid basis for our services is the High Tech platform. About 600 companies are affiliated with it. They pay a modest annual contribution that offers them all kinds of benefits." I am very curious about that and ask: "What does it get them?" "At least a reduction in the costs of participation in courses and meetings. But the most important thing is knowledge sharing. Every company contains unique knowledge. Companies are constantly asking to accelerate their innovation, with a sophisticated system they have access to all those other companies via Mikrocentrum to submit their question. This has created a lively system of exchange, so that you don't have to reinvent the wheel again and again and the available knowledge is optimally used."

## Knowledge sharing and acceleration of innovation

I see the parallels with Brainport Industries. Not only because of the unrelenting enthusiasm of Bert-Jan Woertman, but mainly because companies are constantly reinforcing each other. "That's right," replies Bert-Jan. "Our 600 participants also include many Brainport companies."



*Mikrocentrum: meeting place for the high-tech and manufacturing industry (Source Computable.nl)*

"By being part of different clusters, there is overlap and complementarity. And in all cases that yields more than it costs. Does the Mikrocentrum continue quietly under the guiding hand of Bert-Jan, living on its reputation?"

“Absolutely not,” said Bert-Jan. “Those who don't do business disappear into the background and quickly lose their connection with current developments. We are there for entrepreneurs and employees, so we will constantly have to know what moves them and what their needs are. That is constantly changing. Thus, we're never done. That requires an entrepreneurial attitude from each of us within the staff. I can't do this alone. As a team, we will continue to be part of the leading group!”

## Conclusion

Inspired by these enterprising connectors in the technology sector, I return home and let everything sink in. Can DECP experts do something with these experiences? I see the connection with the basic principles of social dialogue: get to know and trust each other; have common interests; and collaborate for mutual improvement. The role that DECP partners – employers' organisations – can have in developing countries can be that of the entrepreneurial driver. Good social dialogue at the sector or value chain level can lead to valuable partnerships. Clusters, can be limited at the start., can be the familiar stone in the pond. But gradually they can become fully-fledged ecosystems, taking advantage of the law of the inhibiting lead. In the early 1990s, the Eindhoven region was economically dying. Entrepreneurship, hard work and the establishment of mutual trust have made it what it is today: the smartest square kilometre in Europe.

JOS VAN ERP

DECP

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Relevant websites:

<https://www.brainportindustries.com/nl/over-brainport-industries>

<https://www.brainportindustriescampus.com/>

<https://www.mikrocentrum.nl/>

For further reading:

A historical approach for clustering in emerging economies. Valeria Giacomini, 2017

Ecosysteem voor ondernemerschap en welvaart. Prof. Dr. Erik Stam, 2018

Strengthening entrepreneurial ecosystems. GIZ, 2020

Creating a vibrant innovation ecosystem. Prof. Sjoerd Romme, 2017

Regionale ontwikkeling in Sub-Sahara Afrika. Griet Steel, Paul van Linkert, 2016

## Colophon

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Lead editor: Jos van Erp

T: 070- 349 0217

E: [info@decp.nl](mailto:info@decp.nl)

W: [www.decp.nl](http://www.decp.nl)

Bezuidenhoutseweg 12  
Malietoren, 11<sup>th</sup> floor  
2594 AV The Hague

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