

Zachte G: a modern approach  
towards building networks for  
young people in a shrinking region

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Logo Zachte G

Zachte G: a modern approach towards building networks for young people in a shrinking region.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis one possible answer to the question: “How can opportunities for Young people be activated in regions with shrinking population?” will be given by presenting an example of a good practice project: Zachte G<sup>1</sup>-creative energie uit Limburg. This project developed from a need to promote active participation of young people in society, especially in shrinking society of Limburg region in the south of the Netherlands. It aims to bring young people together in a “virtual” environment where they can exercise their artistic aspirations. Moreover, after virtual network is established, physical meetings are set up in order to reinforce the network. Zachte G encourages young people to express their views through art and ensures space and audience where that voice can be heard.

Zachte G is a regional project: It is a platform where young people from Limburg are given a voice to express themselves and raise and tackle relevant issues in society: such as challenging demographic situation in the region, position and opportunities for young people and issues in the society in general. This way, young people’s opportunities to actively participate in this shrinking society are promoted and encouraged.

Arts as means of empowerment and well being is taking larger role in the society. Zachte G project has proven to be an important tool for discussion for young people in the region. It goes beyond work of artists and provides arena where creativity and innovation can be exercised. This is particularly important having in mind demographic developments in the region: shrinking population, ageing and less younger people. Promoting artistic expression not only improves the image of the region, but also encourages young people to stay in the region.

South Limburg, especially with its east part, Parkstad, is seen as a pioneer when it comes to demographic developments. It is relevant to mention that, while other shrinking regions in the Netherlands are rural, Parkstad is only urbanised area that is shrinking. This makes it unique and, also, requires unique responses to the situation. This area is shrinking faster than the rest of the country and response to this is sought by the local politicians. However, attention is often given to the, what is seen as, fields most affected by shrinking: education, housing, municipality finances, stagnating economy, etc. Zachte G recognises the need to see how shrinking influences social and cultural aspects of society and to respond to the developments in a creative manner. It is an example of approach involving arts aimed to broadening the discussion around shrinkage. Aims are to relate modern and urban culture to the theme of shrinkage and, by making use of the ICT technology, reach broader audience. The project highlights different ways decision makers could deal with shrinking population. It is already supported by provincial government who

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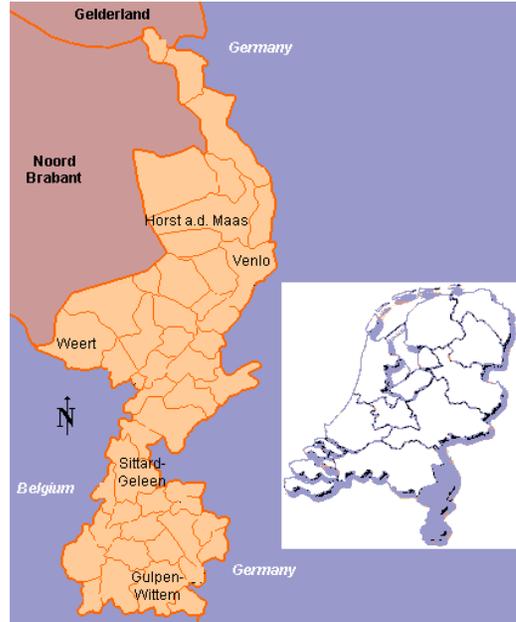
<sup>1</sup> Zachte G-creative energie uit Limburg in Dutch is translated into Soft G-creative energy from Limburg. “Soft G” refers to the way G is pronounced in Limburg (as opposed to hard G from the North of the Netherlands). Pronunciation of G (“Zachte G”) is seen as a part of Limburg’s identity. For the purpose of this piece name “Zachte G” will be used.

recognizes the importance of this project for activation of young people in the region and increase of the opportunities for their participation in civil society.

This piece will first give overview of the region and demographic situation. Next scientific background will be followed by detailed description of the project. Main conclusions will be summarised in the last part.

## 2 SETTING

Limburg, Netherlands



Limburg is most southern out of seven provinces in the Netherlands. It is positioned on the outer part of the Netherlands but its location is central in Europe (Provincie Limburg, 2008). Limburg borders with Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders) on the west and Germany on the east.

Provincial government is based in Maastricht, oldest town in the Netherlands and capital of Limburg. Alongside Maastricht, major urban agglomerations are Sittard-Geleen, Parkstad (including Heerlen) in the south and Venlo in the north. Limburg is characterised with its peripheral position in the Netherlands. As most of the technology and industry is located centrally in the country, many of the young people leave Limburg in search for better education and/or job prospects (Provincie Limburg 2008).

### 2.1 Brief historical overview

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Maastricht became first industry town of the Netherlands, mainly thanks to production of ceramics. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mining industry development begun. It lead to fast growth of the cities as Heerlen, Kerkrade and Geleen and the part of Limburg which in nowadays known as Parkstad (Latten, & Musterd, 2009). Until after the second world war Limburg was main producer of coal to the Netherlands.

Mining industry heavily influenced South Limburg in every aspect. It has left a mark on the environment: from mainly agricultural region moved to more urban character. Towns grew mainly around mining centres and the economy of the

region developed thanks to the “black gold”. Before the introduction of mining industry this was a agricultural region with 22 000 inhabitants. By the closure of the mines this number was ten times bigger. At that time it was one of the most densely populated areas in the Netherlands. More small centres, instead of one metropolis were created. Most changes took place in social sphere. Mining industry attracted many workers from the Netherlands and from abroad. Houses were built for these workers by the management. Due to growth of coal mining industry and , following, population growth, region experienced prosperity over the last 120 years.

In 1965 complete termination of coal mining was announced by Dutch government. This had enormous consequences on social and economic structure, employment and cultural and economic development in Limburg. Mine workers got older and many young people left the region, either to look for employment or higher education possibilities. Moreover, many people became “unfit” for the labour market what produced high unemployment rate. This resulted in high level of unemployment which had serious consequences for the prosperity in the province. It is possible that Parkstad, as the part most affected by the closing of the mines, experienced economic and demographic challenges and developments and nowadays leading in shrinking developments. It can be argued that the closing of the mines had a long term effect on this part of Limburg(Latten, & Musterd, 2009). Moreover, mining lead to certain culture in which many people still live in. This orientation to the past together with the influence of traditional influence of Catholic church are some of the factors that are influencing the image of the region as unattractive to the youngsters. This raises question: how to make the region more attractive to youngsters. Raising their participation in society is one of the ways and Zachte G is a good example of how this can be done by creating virtual, and physical, environment where young people can actively play a part.

In the 1980s provincial government started to stimulate tourism in Limburg. Image of the region was changed from industrial (black) to green. Thus, today recreation industry and tourism are developed. Moreover, a lot of international business have their offices in Limburg. However, impacts of structural change and demographic trends it initiated will be long lasting (Kernteam Regiodialoog Parkstad, 2008).

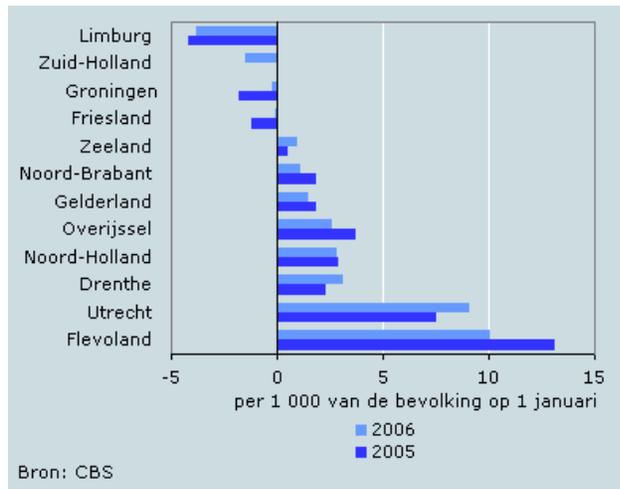
According to CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2009) is the labour market participation , as well as educational level, in Parkstad lowest in the Netherlands. Also, number of households who are receiving social benefits is the highest.

Next, some demographic data will be given.

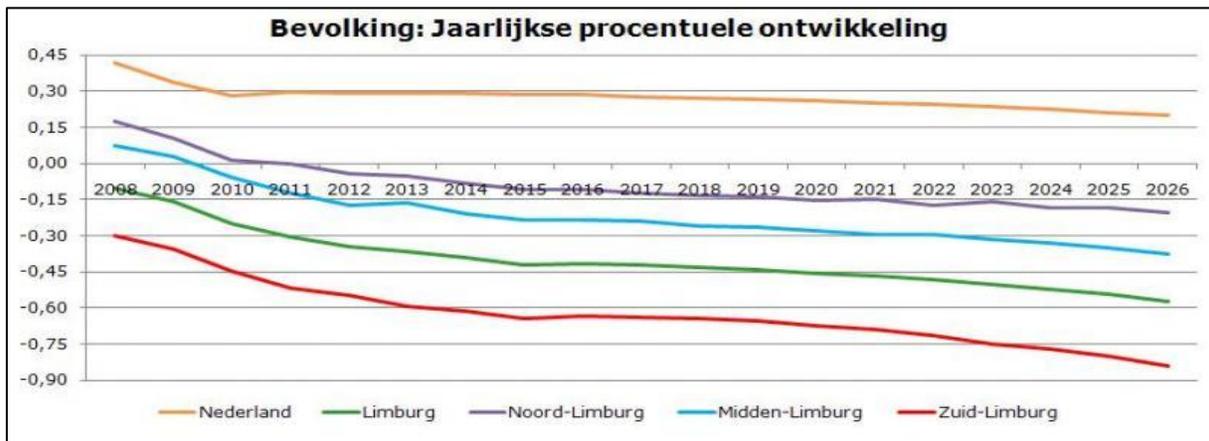
### 3 DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION

After the “population explosion” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some parts of the Netherlands are currently confronted with decreasing population. Province of Limburg, more specifically Zuid (south) Limburg was first confronted with shrinking (Provincie Limburg, 2006). Moreover, the Zuid-Limburg region is ahead when it comes to the shrinkage in the Netherlands (Hermans, 2009). Most important reason for this developments is combination of negative growth and negative migration balance (VROM, 2009). Furthermore, as discussed above, historical developments can be linked to current demographic situation and shrinking of the population.

Next graph shows demographic developments in Dutch regions.



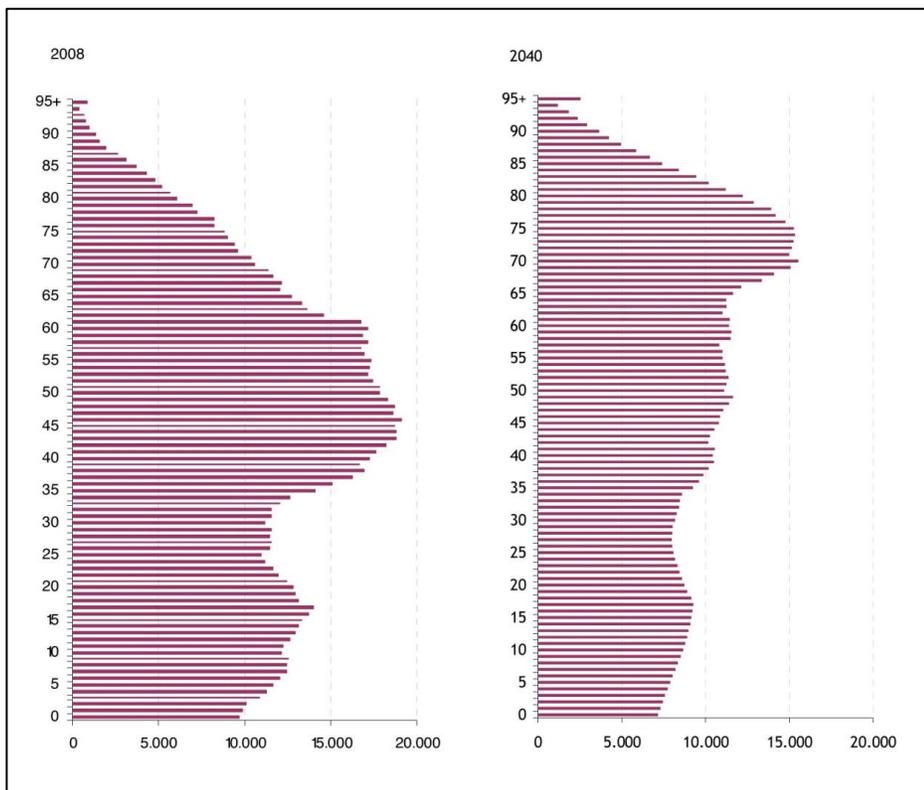
Demographic developments in Dutch regions (Source: CBS (2009))



Population developments (Source: Van meer naar beter (2009))

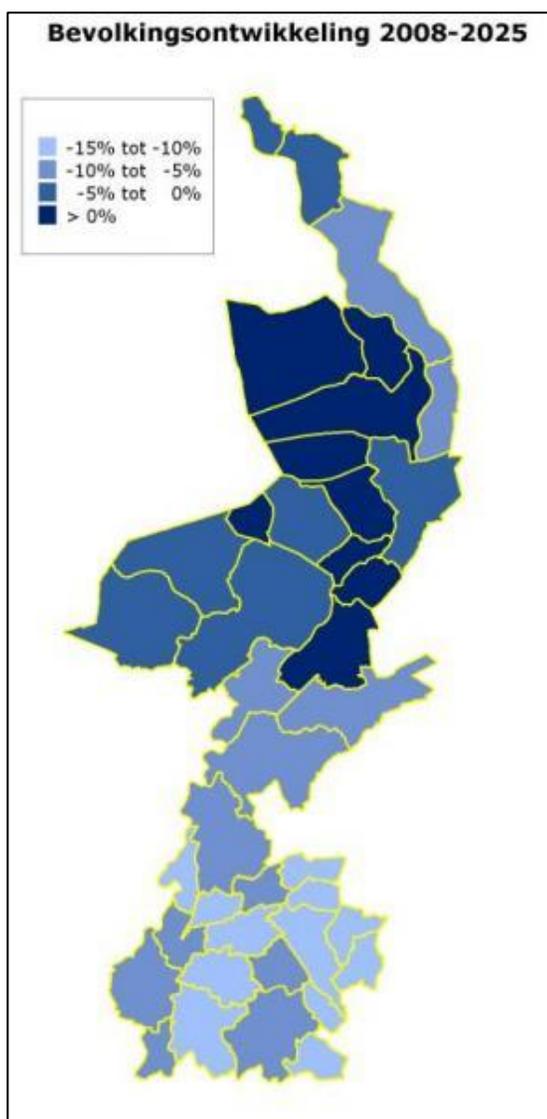
For the purpose of this thesis, special attention has been given to the demographic changes and population decline in Limburg. As evident from the graph above (population developments) demographic situation in South (Zuid) Limburg is most critical when it comes to shrinking population.

Due to its demographic situation Limburg is confronted with changing social connections, economic change and transformation of the labour market, changing environment and need for tackling issues of regional leadership and quality of life (Provincie Limburg, 2006). Reality of the population decline has impact on many aspects of life such as: demolition of neighbourhoods, stagnating economy, possibility that care and support for the elderly, chronically ill and people with disabilities could become problematic, etc. Demographic developments are often seen as problematic. Shrinking, instead of growing, is seen as failure of politics to provide the society with adequate leadership. This kind of thinking only enforces the negative image of the “shrinking region”. However, ‘shrinking’ also offers possibilities such as more green spaces, recreation and tourism, development of distance learning, etc. (Reverda, 2009). Recently, local politics is trying to promote transfer from quantity to quality thinking and boos the image of the region by supporting benefits shrinking of the population can offer. However, this is a long and complex process of changing paradigms: from grow to decline thinking.



Above image illustrates age structure in Limburg 2008 and prediction for 2040 (source: CBS, Etil)

Next Picture shows prediction of population shrinking in Limburg in the period 2008-2025.

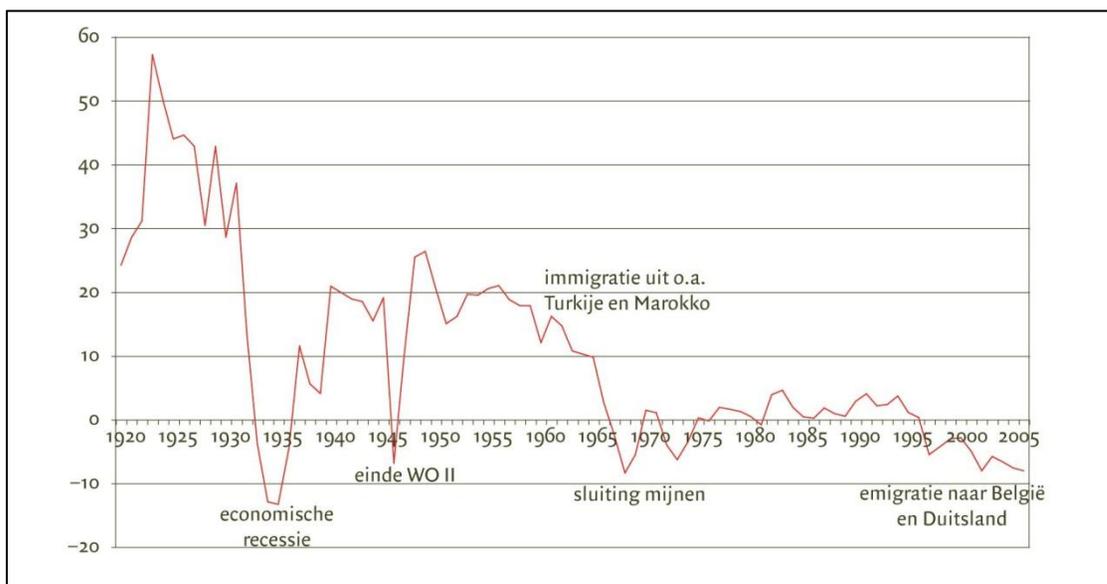


Population development in Limburg (2008-2025) (Source: Van meer naar beter(2009))

### 3.1 Historical population developments

As discussed in previous chapter, population in most of Limburg grew in 20<sup>th</sup> century. This changed in mid 1990s. After that municipalities were confronted with shrinking population. Parkstad was first to experience this

developments. Furthermore, due to this developments Limburg is seen as proof region for the developments that will follow in the rest of the Netherlands and most of Europe in near future<sup>2</sup>.



Above graph illustrates historical population development in Parkstad: with down points being economic recession in 1930s, end World War Two in the 1940s, closing of the mines in the 1960s and emigration to Germany or Belgium (starting in the 1990s and ongoing). Only high point on this graph represents immigration from Turkey and Morocco in the 1950s-1960)

(Source: Chkalova and Nicolaas 2009 in Latten & Mustard 2009)

### 3.2 Young versus old

In Limburg trend of shrinking of the population and changing proportions of different age groups is present. Number of young people decreases while number of older people increases. This trend is likely to continue due to the greater job opportunities in other parts of the country (namely, central in the Netherlands). Also, less children being born in last few decades, people are living longer and many are moving to other parts of the country, etc. All this contributes to the ageing of society.

Often, ageing is looked upon from an “tunnel vision” perspective: focus is on the elderly and ageing policies: sustainability of the pension system and care provision. Shrinking of the population implies that the number of elderly people will rise and this is mainly looked upon as a negative development. Main associations are: increased need for care provision (e.g. Luc de Witte in De nieuwe groei heet krimp), higher demand on pensions, etc. On the other hand,

<sup>2</sup> UN (in Bevolkingsdaling in cijfers, 2009) predicts that Europe will shrink for 0.22% in the period from 2007 to 2050.

older people hold powerful positions in politics of the region and are financially dominant. All this contributes to focus around older people, whether because of their power or future prospects. This way interest in developments around young people is diminished and they are less engaged in society.

Furthermore, one could argue that image of the region as “ageing” contributes to the departure of the young people to more attractive parts of the country. This is often overseen, as when it comes to ageing, focus is on sustaining social security systems and pension funds. Position of young people in ageing society, thus, fails to reach the top of the agenda. This is where Zachte G, as an alternative way of organising civil society, promotes engagement of young people. Through this project youth in the region is made visible and able to express themselves in a creative way.

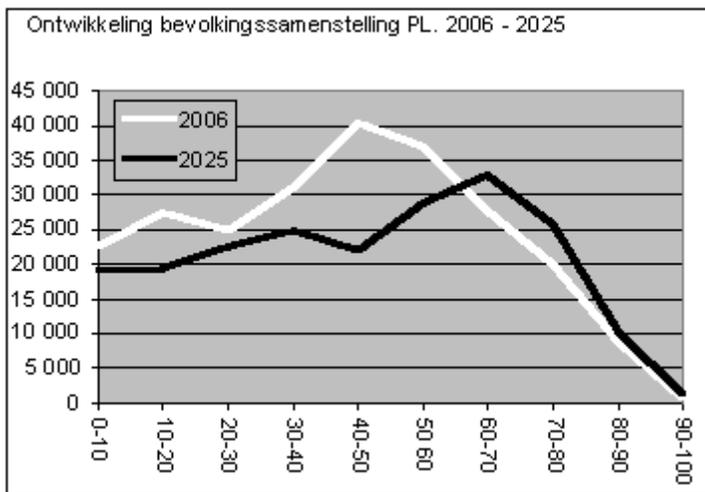
LIMBURG	2005	2015	2025	2035
0-14 jaar	189.500	160.900	148.000	143.700
15-65 jaar	769.200	727.000	649.100	562.000
65 jaar en ouder	180.300	223.600	267.700	292.700
<b>Totaal</b>	<b>1.139.000</b>	<b>1.111.500</b>	<b>1.064.800</b>	<b>998.400</b>

Above Table demonstrates the age structure in Limburg (Source: Provincie Limburg, 2008)

### 3.3 Parkstad on the forefront of shrinking

Parkstad<sup>3</sup>, as a east part of Limburg, is confronted with rather dramatic demographic developments. It is ahead when it comes to shrinkage in the Netherlands. In this part of Limburg shrinking of the population is linked to deindustrialisation, suburbanisation and declining number of children. First two developments are specific for Parkstad, while decreasing number of children is universal for the whole of the Netherlands. Region is faced not only with ageing population, but also with youngsters leaving the region, either for study or work purposes. According to the E'til prognoses (2008) Heerlen, centre community of Parkstad, will lose almost 10% of its population until 2020. The same holds true for the whole region of Parkstad. According to the same report it is advised to demolish approximately 12.000 houses until 2020 due to shrinkage.

<sup>3</sup> Parkstad Limburg is a collaboration on an administrative level between the South-Netherlands based communities of Heerlen, Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Brunssum, Voerendaal, Simpelveld en Onderbanken.



*Prognosis for demographic developments in Parkstad Limburg (Source: CBS)*

This will have big influence on many aspects of society. Existing infrastructure is built to function in the situation of growth. Moreover, shrinking brings negative image to the region which only reinforces it. Shrinking population tends to be seen as a negative development which should be reversed. But shrinkage doesn't necessarily imply negative consequences. It can be seen as an opportunity for developing other aspects of society which was impossible in the times of continuing growth of population as discussed above. Recently, there is a move towards acceptance of this development and development of appropriate answers to shrinkage.

Shrinking of the population is inevitable prospect for Limburg. It is, indeed, multidisciplinary occurrence which influences many aspect of the society. Limburg is one of the first regions in Europe where ageing, young people leaving the region and depopulation go hand in hand.

These issues need to be observed in a wider frame: looking at social, economic, special, etc. reasons. In its shrinking circumstances creative responses such as Zachte G are necessary to keep the region viable. Moreover, as illustrated above, young people play integral part in responding to this developments.

Shrinking of the population is complex issue that will be high on agenda in the coming decades.

# 4 ZACHTE G PROJECT

## 4.1 Idea/identified need

Zachte G is a virtual web platform on which young people of Limburg can display their talent and work. Its mission is to contribute to a vital climate for young and creative people in Limburg. A climate in which there is room for initiative, experiment and diversity. The context of Limburg is such, with its ageing and shrinking population, that there is a strong need for initiatives that enhances opportunities for young people.



## 4.2 Description

Initially Zachte G started as a creative web community. An open and social platform that is shaped by the input of its users and members. It provides individual talents the possibility to promote themselves, their talents and their work. Collectively the platform provides an image of the talent-richness of Limburg.

An important principle of Zachte G is the grassroots approach. Zachte G is open for anyone who recognises him/herself in the concept. As stated, the content of Zachte G is heavily shaped by the input that users and members provide. This guarantees the bottom-up character and provides a virtual space for the new-thinking, the vulnerable initiatives and the upcoming talents in Limburg.

The members of Zachte G provide a diverse picture of what creative talent in Limburg has to offer. It's community consists of Graphic-designers, photographers, theatre-producers, interior-designers, painters, media-wizzkids, poets etc. Each member has the possibility to display their work, activities and opinions.

With all this Zachte G contributes in forming new networks for young talented people making this talent more visible for the outside. To do this it makes use of modern media to overcome physical distance (Limburg is a fairly stretched-out province at the outskirts of the Netherlands). Besides the physical distance it also tries to restraint the mental barriers that seems to exist given the history of Limburg.

A few principles of Zachte G:

- Zachte G believes in the endogenous strengths of Limburg
- Zachte G envisions Limburg as a modern region as opposed to the image of the Silver Economy
- Despite the fact that ZachteG.nl is initially virtual, the physical element is vital in building the Zachte G network. No virtual network can be build without physical meetings.



In its second year of existence Zachte G developed further into four pillars:

1. **Zachte G platform** – [www.zachteg.nl](http://www.zachteg.nl)

The platform of Zachte G has developed into a platform with 300 plus members. Each member has his/her own portfolio in which they can display their work. Furthermore, each member can submit news, agenda or calls for initiatives.

On a monthly bases a few thousand unique visitors attend to ZachteG.nl.

2. **ZachteG TV** – [www.zachteg.tv](http://www.zachteg.tv)

Zachte G TV is a web TV channel in which Limburg is positioned as a modern region in which contemporary culture is existing next to the more traditional forms of culture that are dominant in Limburg. Each month a unique feature of the creative landscape of Limburg is highlighted in an episode of Zachte G TV.

3. **Zachte G webshop** – [www.dutchbutnotfromholland.eu](http://www.dutchbutnotfromholland.eu)

The Zachte G webshop “Dutch but not from Holland” provides a selection of the work of Zachte G artists. The products vary from art pieces to contemporary (Dutch) design.

4. **Zachte G Event** – [www.letsgetphysical.eu](http://www.letsgetphysical.eu)

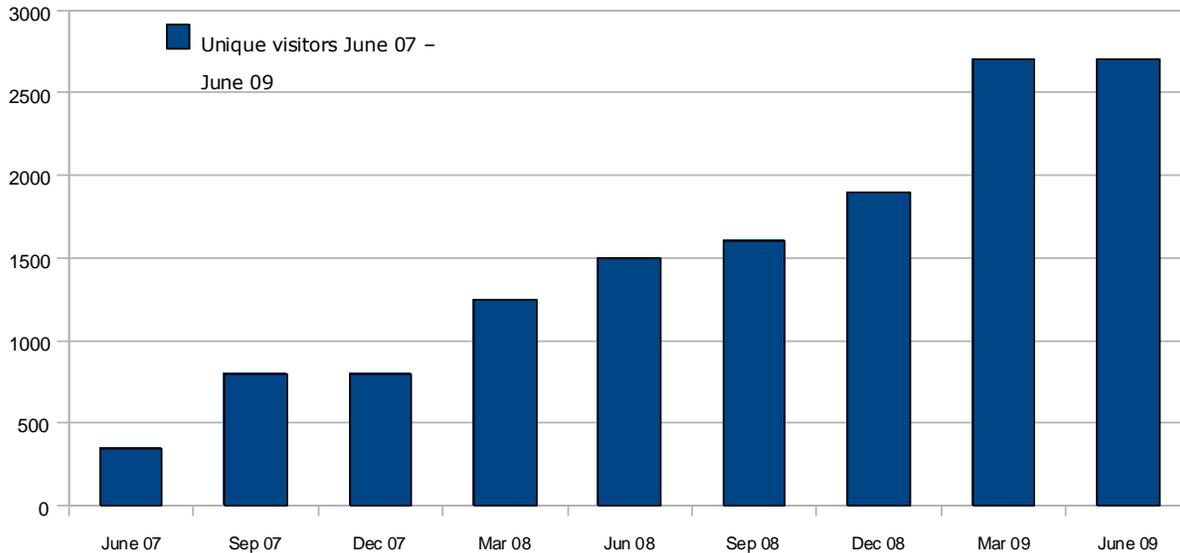
In may 2009 the first Zachte G Event was organized. The importance of bringing a virtual community together in a physical setting led to the concept of the Zachte G Event. The first Zachte G Event had the mission to transfer the principles of the virtual platform to a physical event. More than 200 plus young creatives attended the Event. The event took place in Heerlen, which is the epicentre of Shrinkage in Limburg.



Above: Images from Zachte G event (Source: [www.zachteg.nl](http://www.zachteg.nl))

### 4.3 Evaluation

The quality of Zachte G can be measured in a quantitative and qualitative manner. To measure a website in a quantitative manner the number of visitors that visit a website can be monitored. In the table below the development of the number of ZachteG.nl visitors is shown for the period of June 2007 to June 2009.



source: AW Stats

ZachteG.nl visitors is shown for the period of June 2007 to June 2009. Another quantitative parameter is the number of members that Zachte G has. In the last year of its existence the number of members grew from 220 (June 2008) to 330 (31th of August) members at the moment of writing. This is an increase of more than 50%.

In December 2008 the results of the first Zachte G survey were published. Some 70 of the 221 members (November 2008) participated in the online survey. The purpose of the survey was not only to get feedback on Zachte G but also to give the member the opportunity to give their thoughts on future plans concerning Zachte G. Here are a few of the results:

- On a scale from 1 to 10 the average of 6.8 was given for the total quality of Zachte G;
- 70% of the participants were male;
- 50% stated that networking was the main purpose they used Zachte G for. 45% stated that personal profiling was the main reason.
- 81% of the participants stated that it would be useful and interesting to meet their virtual colleagues in an Event.
- 87% of the participants stated that if a webshop would be developed it should have an international look & feel. The reason for this was that the 87% strongly believed in the international potential of talented designers from Limburg.
- Geographically the members of Zachte G were spread throughout Limburg but with a strong focus on the South of Limburg.

#### 4.4 Future

This region faces great challenges when it comes to demographic changes such as ageing and a declining population. It is key for this region that cooperation is sought with the inhabitants in order to develop strategies and ideas for coping with these challenges. Young people and their talents are essential when it comes to maintaining the vitality in Limburg and Parkstad. The importance of involving young people and make use of their talents in the process of developing strategies, ideas and concepts in relation to the demographic challenges cannot be underestimated.

Zachte G could play a role in this process since Zachte G provides a pool for creative, diverse and young talents. This is not only because they can provide the Shrinking-process with fresh input. Also, because the region needs these young talents. The topic of the demographic changes is about their future and to maintain a vital, open and creative climate in which they can live and work. It seems more than logical that young people get involved to shape their own future.

What could Zachte G do in relation to demographic changes:

- Zachte G could publish a shrinkage manifesto on ZachteG.nl. Visitors of ZachteG.nl would get the opportunity to sign the manifesto.
- Zachte G could organize interdisciplinary sessions in which talent from various backgrounds start thinking about the issue of demographic changes
- Zachte G could organize a shrinkage talent battle in which Zachte G members would use their creative talents to think and visualize strategies, concepts and ideas for shrinkage.

## 5 SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

In previous chapter Zachte G project has been presented. Here, scientific base for this initiative will be elaborated upon. Link between theory and Zachte G can be found in many contemporary theories: networking, creative class, Information society, etc. Many authors have written about the importance of creativity (Florida, Boden, Jacobs) and networking and information technologies (Castells, Carrington) . For the purpose of this piece I will focus on work of Florida (2002) about the importance of the creative class for the wellbeing in society and Castells (2001) who discusses about networking and information society and it's characteristics.

### 5.1 Creative class: ultimate economic recourse

Richard Florida is emphasising importance of the creative talent for development of the town/region (2002). In his book : “The rise of the creative class...and how it's transforming work, leisure, community, & everyday life” he elaborates on the influence of inventive individuals on the well being of society. Economic growth is directly linked with the number of creative, well educated people in the area. Florida argues that concentration of this sort of individuals attracts business, hence economic welfare, promotes tolerance and generates talent. Moreover, economic and technological creativity are nurtured by and interact with artistic and cultural creativity (Florida, 2002, p.5).

Human creativity is ultimate economic resource (Florida, 2002). It is a key factor that ultimately raises productivity and living standards. Whereas before, materials and industry have been major deliverers of welfare, nowadays more emphasis is on knowledge society and production of goods by, so called, creative class.

Creativity is multidimensional and comes in many forms. Florida recognises artists, scientists, teachers, hairdressers, and many more creative occupations. The main point is that people are able to exercise their creative and innovative potentials in their work.

It is recognised that in the shrinking areas the move needs to be made from quantity to quality. Many politicians are arguing this is a necessity in order to adequately deal with shrinking population. This is where creativity needs to play important role and make this possible. The transition from agricultural to industrial age, which can be seen also in this region, was based on natural resources. Nowadays, transition is moving away from physical input and it's based on human intelligence, knowledge and creativity. Furthermore, when looking at the socio economic situation, especially in Parkstad, key of improving it doesn't lie in providing welfare programmes or low paid factory jobs but promoting the creativity of people, paying the appropriately and integrating them in creative economy.

Answer to the question how to built creative community lies in the new strategies. Need to create a place where creative experience can flourish. Zachte G, with its mission plays important role: it stimulates development of creative potential in the region and, at the same time, gives young people opportunity to develop and exhibit their talent.

Government needs to invest in promoting creativity of its young people.

Furthermore, after elaborating on the significance of promoting creativity, importance of networking and ICT will be touched upon.

## **5.2 Networks: the organisation form of the information society**

According to Castells (1996) “Information Technology is to this revolution (Information Society) what a new sources of energy were to the successive Industrial Revolutions”. This quote emphasises the importance of the IT in contemporary society. This means faster transfer of information and easier creation of networks. Zachte G provides excellent example of both: network of individuals with the same interest is created and information is shared. Moreover, Wood and Laundry (2008) argue that that the web provides multifarious opportunities for two-way communication and influence as well cultural phenomena.

For the purpose of this project networking theory plays crucial role. Castells (2001) defines networking as the capacity to assemble resources in a very flexible, adaptable way around projects and then carry these projects out. Networks are today what large, hierarchical corporations, mass production and assemble line were for industrial age. They are referred to as the dominant organisational form of Information Society.

Network is set of interconnected nodes without a centre. This doesn’t refer only to the virtual aspects of networks but also on the” physical component”. ICTs are vital in the communication process of a network but need remains to meet network participants in person. Zachte G works according to this presumptions: members mainly communicate virtually but need for physical gathering is recognised, and implemented/accomplished. This will be discussed afterwards in more detail.

Big advantage of networks is that they are more flexible and able to process resources and follow signals effectively. Moreover, network can link up anything or anybody what is important according to dominant values and interests. Thus, rigid institutions are no longer appropriate when it comes to human interaction. They are replaced by flexible networks: as a choice of autonomous individuals. In such, “network society” people interact more actively and social capital, with its networks and informal structures, flourishes (Reverda, 2004).

Those who succeed in participating in different networks will increase their opportunities on a long run.

Zachte G can be seen as a new form of social contact and civic involvement. Ladd (1998) and Norris (2002) suggest that by giving new impulses to communication between people and leading to new ways in building communities and

shaping civic engagement, ICTs are assumed to empower civil society. Hence, internet can provide cheap and easy way to build networks of individuals with common interest and at the same way strengthen civil society.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this thesis we presented Zachte G project and the significance of this creative answer to shrinking population.

Namely, project raises awareness concerning the process of shrinkage in Limburg, and especially the east part of the region: Parkstad, by not only offering a program but also by communicating results and outcomes beyond the scope of the official project initiating the discussion about the demographic change on regional level.

It is a binding agent for the creative young people in Limburg: with providing opportunities for virtual and physical communication it enables group forming and promotes social cohesion in the region. It is, at the same time oriented and shaped by its users, giving them space to communicate their creative talent.

Zachte G is broadening the horizon of policy makers in the region when it comes to thinking of strategies, interventions and policies regarding shrinkage. Value of the project has been recognised by provincial government which is supporting it financially.

Zachte G project is an important initiative and could be duplicable, not only in shrinking, but in all regions in order to activate young people and promote their participation in society.

This project actively improves young people's self esteem and motivation, while challenging mainstream perception of shrinking region.

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