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Modernizing the labor union in the region

Contemporary collectivity and decentralization at FNV

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Abstract

The regional organizations and operations of the FNV, a Dutch labor union, is explored, considering there is a regional variation in union membership. Interviews show that the FNV increased its regional presence, by developing its regional organization and position in the regional labor market infrastructure. This increases visibility to (potential) members, after decreasing membership numbers. Decentralization and regional funding have increased the importance of regional organization governance, to improve comprehensive wellbeing of members. Existing regional identities aid the development of activities and visibility, to counteract centralization of the organization in the Randstad. Additionally, the regional organization allows for cross-sectoral collaboration.

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Introduction

1.1 The union in the region in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, union density varies across regions which is partially explained by regional socio-historical context. While the average union density in the Netherlands is 18,4%, this varies between provinces. The three Northern provinces of Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe have the highest rate of union density with 28,5%, 26,4% and 24,9%, whereas Utrecht and Noord-Brabant have the lowest density at 15,9% and 15,1%, respectively (CBS, 2019). This can be partially explained by characteristics of union membership on the individual level (e.g. age, gender, education level, hours worked per week), which varies across regions, influenced by their sectoral distribution (Gielen & Floris, 2018). On the aggregate level, Van der Laan (1993) conducted one of the few empirical studies which explained regional union density variation. He found that while the degree of urbanization negatively affects union density and that the political economic position of the region is positively related to union membership, the explained variation is low and thereby union membership in the Netherlands is influenced by the historical social-spatial context of the region. Considering the importance of the regional influence on union membership, it follows to explore the effects the region has on the internal organization of the union.

This thesis builds on the work of scholars who previously analyzed and described the Dutch labor market since the Akkoord van Wassenaar in 1982¹, in particular Been, Keune, & Tros (2019), de Beer (2013) and Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen (2004). These scholars primarily discuss the state of the Dutch labor market on the macro scale, and its interactions with the sectoral structure of labor organization in the Netherlands. However, I will analyze the regional scale of labor organization, which currently lacks empirical research. Three reasons a spatial analysis of the labor union organization and activities is needed on the regional level are: (I) the (socio-historical) regional differences in labor union density (Van der Laan, 1993) indicate there is a regional component that affects labor organization and membership in the Netherlands, (II) with decreased influence of the Dutch national government, labor organization has declined in favor of deregulation and decentralization (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019), and the regional scale is suspected to become more important in the multi-scalar system of labor organization, and (III) currently the regional governance structure of labor regulation is not well-documented, neither in academia nor outside it, contrary to the national and sectoral structures.

1.2 Regional organization of the union

While I expect various unions to try to adapt to a more decentralized system of labor organization, I explore this through a case study of the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, or FNV. I selected this union as a case, as it is the largest union in the Netherlands: in 2021, 916.000 of the total 1.500.000 union

¹ Available at: https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrqszy/akkoord_van_wassenaar_1982

members in the Netherlands are members of the FNV (CBS, 2021). Because of its large share of the total union members in the Netherlands, I expect that (regional) trends that affect this union also occur in other unions, and is thus a good starting point to bridge the current gap in empirical research on the regional organization of unions in the Netherlands.

1.3 Research goal and research questions

My main goal is to explore what the regional organization and activities of the FNV entail, and to find whether these activities differ in various regions in the Netherlands as a result of the influence of the regional context on union membership. Finally, I explore whether there is an influence of membership and member characteristics on the activities of the organization in the region. This could be due to a variation of members needs in a particular region, or as a result of differentiation in sectoral division across regions. Alongside socio-economic characteristics, socio-cultural and/or political factors and trends are suspected to influence union activities in a region.

I will research how the activities of the labor union FNV vary across regions in the Netherlands and what explains these variations in union density, both in activity and membership. From this the following research question follows:

Research Question: How does the regional scale influence the operations and organization of the FNV in the Netherlands?

This is found by answering the following sub questions:

Sub Question 1: Is there a regional component in the organization of the FNV, and if so why?

Sub Question 2: Are there differences in regional organization and operations within the FNV, and if so how can these be explained?

Sub Question 3: How do changes in (regional) labor and (regional) labor organization in the Netherlands affect the FNV?

1.4 Chapter guide

After this introduction, I will present the theoretical framework where I explore relevant scholarly and statistical information on the topic of union density, Dutch labor regulation and internal organization of unions, as well as external trends that I expect to be of relevance. Chapter three elaborates on the methodology of the empirical data collection. This includes a description of the FNV as a case study as well as a description of the data collection, analysis methods, and of research ethics. Chapter four presents the results of the research, which I discuss based on the operationalization of theories and methods in the previous chapters. This thesis concludes with a chapter summarizing the main findings of the study and answers the research questions, as well as recommendations for further research.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores the relevant academic literature. First, I discuss the importance of union membership, regional variation in union density in the Netherlands, and relevant publications exploring this variation. Thereafter I discuss labor organization and regulation in the Netherlands. I present relevant scales, actors and historical developments, which lead to a description of current activities and goals of unions, focused on the Dutch context. Finally, organizational theory specific to the context of labor unions is discussed, which I embed in a decentralized environment and the changing character of labor. This chapter concludes with a conceptual framework which incorporates the findings of the literature review.

2.1 The (regional) issue of union membership

2.1.1 Membership and resources

When exploring the relation between regional membership and regional union activities it is important to consider the relevance of union membership generally. There has been a steady decline in union membership numbers in the Netherlands since the start of the century. Membership dropped from 1.936.000 in 1999 to 1.504.000 in 2021 (CBS, 2015; CBS, 2021). At the time of writing, a recent upswing in union membership was reported by the media (NRC, 2023; RTL Nieuws, 2023). The decline in union membership in the 21st century is arguably still the largest challenge for the Dutch system of labor relations (De Beer, 2013). Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen (2004) identify membership density as an important theme in labor relations research. Membership density is of vital importance for unions as it affects the capacity for collective action, as well as the legitimacy and acceptance of the union as representative of workers. Referring to capacity for collective action, Tros, Albeda & Derksen (2004) identify that the degree of union density influences the power of the union. Collective action is the general foundation of union power, and the larger the membership base the larger the potential effect of collective action. Additionally, there is a financial incentive of membership: more members are equal to more financial resources through membership fees, which affects the operational power of the union. Regarding the second point, the degree of membership affects the legitimacy of representation of the union. Low union density opens unions up to the critique that they do not represent the workforce. Similarly, a mismatch between the workforce and the union membership base, which is due to a self-selection bias of specific workers to the union (discussed in the previous paragraph), can affect the degree of representative legitimacy of the union. This supports the relevance of studying regional variation in membership density.

2.1.2 Membership and influence

While declining membership numbers open unions to critique of their claims of their legitimacy as representation of the workforce, this problem is embedded in the system of labor organization in the Netherlands. While the union has the mandate to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, their negotiating power is grounded in the extent to which their membership base represents the workforce. However, as collective bargaining agreements cover both union and non-union members, currently 80% of the employees in the Netherlands are covered under a collective bargaining agreement (AWNV, 2022). This rate has been stable for decades (Tros & Keune, 2019). As only 17% of the employees are union

members, this has created a *free-rider* problem. It reduces the incentive for workers to join the union if they can profit from collective agreements made by the unions (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019; CBS, 2021a). A large number of scholars have discussed the collective bargaining agreement and its effects (Boeri & Van Ours, 2013; Hayter, 2015; Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Tros et al., 2017; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019, and others). The free-rider problem has been explored in the Dutch context by De Beer (2013), who addressed the difference between *logic of membership* and *logic of influence*. In fact, it appears that the decline in membership has led to a decline in influence: an increasing number of collective bargaining agreements are signed into effect without the support of the FNV (Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019). However, business cycles and in particular unemployment rates, are also influential external factors that affect the negotiating power of unions beyond representation rates (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004). Therefore, while union membership presents regional variation, the degree of its effects on regional influence of the labor union is expected to be (partially) negated by the centralized power of labor organization in the Netherlands. Therefore, how much regional union density variation in reality affects the regional organization of the labor union, and whether a high regional labor union membership density also led to more regional influence in socio-economic outcomes, remains to be empirically explored.

2.1.3 Regional variation in union membership density

In 2021, there were a total of 1.504.000 union members in the Netherlands. In this year, 17,5% of the labor force was member of a union² (CBS, 2021a). However, these percentages are not evenly distributed across the Netherlands. This is visualized in Figure 1 and Table 1 which show the variation in union membership across provinces in 2018. As shown in the table and figure, the three northern provinces, and Zeeland had the highest density in union membership, while Utrecht and Brabant had the lowest. An enlarged version of Figure 1 is attached in Appendix A.1 (p. 43). Appendix A.2 (p. 44) shows the variation across COROP areas (NUTS-3 level).

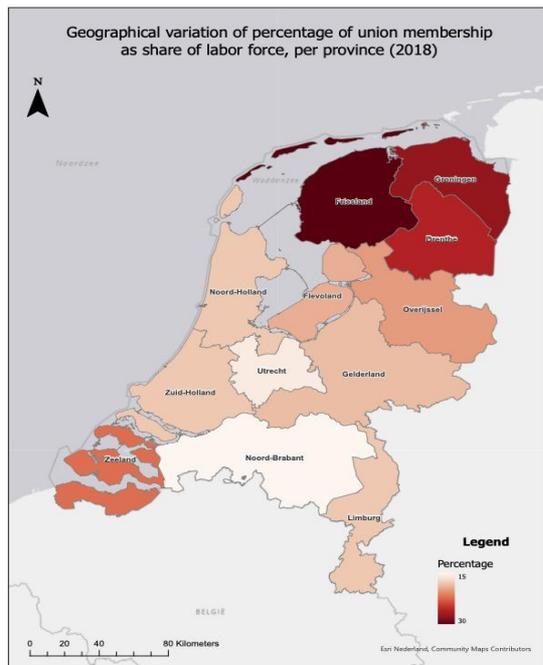


Table 1: Geographical variation in number of union memberships as a share of the labor force across provinces, 2018 (created by author, data from: CBS (2019)).

Province	% of employees
Groningen	26,4
Friesland	28,5
Drenthe	24,9
Overijssel	19,7
Flevoland	18,9
Gelderland	18,3
Utrecht	15,9
Noord-Holland	17,8
Zuid-Holland	17,8
Zeeland	21,6
Noord-Brabant	15,1
Limburg	17,8
Total the Netherlands	18,4

Figure 1: Geographical variation in number of union memberships as a share of the labor force across provinces in 2018, visualized as a gradual color scale ranging from 15% (light) to 30% (dark) (created by author, data from: CBS (2019)).

² It should be noted that persons without employment can also be union members, making the total number of union members higher than its percentage of the workforce.

There is little empirical research which examines these regional variations. There are general characteristics that are found to be important in determining whether someone is likely to be a union member. Specifically, Gielen & Floris (2018) found that in the Netherlands older age, gender (male), working more than 12 hours per week and mid-level education are statistically significant determinants of union membership on the individual level. Furthermore, some industries enjoy higher levels of membership, such as the public sector and construction, whereas other sectors generally have lower levels of membership (e.g. the hospitality industry) (Ter Steege, Van Groeningen, Kuijpers, & Van Cruchten, 2013). The regional spread of these characteristics can partially explain the regional variation in union density. Van der Laan (1993) found multicollinearities between union membership characteristics, for example the predominance of part-time work amongst women and in particular industries such as healthcare and the hospitality industry, and the gender bias in self-selection into these industries (CBS, 2022). However, to what extent variation in union membership across industries is a result of the characteristics of the workers within the sector is not known.

To this point, Van der Laan (1993) has explored the regional variations in trade union membership in the Netherlands through analysis of FNV membership rates on the regional level in 1987. This study found that two groups of variables, grouped under 'urbanization' and 'political economic position,' influence union membership in the region. 'Urbanization' referred to variables of sectoral structure, educational level, participation of women on the labor market, which negatively relate to FNV membership. The 'political economic position' variables, such as a high number of left-wing votes, high unemployment, and low level of consumer services, increases FNV membership. However, the explained variation is low, and Van der Laan shows that influential factors do not have the same strength across regions. He argues that the potential for union membership cannot be deduced only from a set of universal variables, but should be complemented with exploration of social relations in the region. Particularly because "union membership – certainly in the Netherlands – can only be explained from a historical social – spatial context" (1993, p. 267). This relates to the social-economic development, as the regional arena is not only a reflection of the socioeconomic development, but the regional arena simultaneously shapes this development. Additionally, these social-spatial processes, which take place within a historical context, influence future regional patterns. Following this, the long-standing history of unionization and collective action in the Northern region³ would help to explain why the three northern provinces have such strong degrees of union membership (Table 1, p. 7). This shows that the regional scale is a valuable scale to study local-regional activities, particularly as there currently is no strong empirical evidence explaining regional variation in union membership across regions in the Netherlands.

Building on the work of Van Der Laan (1993), it follows that there are two gaps in the current empirical research on regional union density. First, it is not known how the historical socio-spatial context influences union density across regions, only that it does. Second, his work does raise the subsequent question on the effect of this regional membership variation. This is relevant particularly in the context of the relation between union membership and the development of union activities, specifically in the region.

³ Specifically, the strike in the cardboard industry in East-Groningen in 1969 led by Frè Meis was generally regarded as one of the first and very influential examples of collective action. See also: Zanen (2009) and Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen (2004).

Having established that the union is not necessarily a reflection of the labor population, this raises the question as to whom the union considers when developing activities. To this point, Van Cruchten & Kuijpers (2007) argue that the existing lack of younger workers in the membership base of unions can create a spiral of future decline in youth membership numbers. An overrepresentation of older members might cause the union to over prioritize the needs of their current (older) members, further disincentivizing younger workers to join the union. This raises the question as to whether the regional variation in union membership characteristics additionally leads to a regional variation in union activities. This gap in research will be empirically explored in this thesis.

2.2 Multi-scalar labor organization

2.2.1 Scales and actors

The discussion of the influence of the regional scale on the operations of unions should primarily be embedded into the multi-scalar structure of labor in organization and regulation in the Netherlands. The collective bargaining agreement is an example of centralized power on the national level. However, labor is also organized and regulated on smaller scales. Tros et al. (2017) list three different scales of the socioeconomic system: *macro*, *meso*, *micro*, in which they identify *meso* as the branch/sector level and *micro* as the firm level. The various socioeconomic scales are important for labor regulation in the Netherlands as this takes place on various levels and is subjected to political influences. More specifically, scholars have identified a shift towards decentralization in labor organization in the Netherlands, subsequently shifting the emphasis from the macro to meso level. Historically, decentralization has resulted from the national government taking a smaller role in labor negotiations in favor of the unions and employer associations after the Wassenaar Agreement in 1982 (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019). This is exemplified more recently with the Participation Act of 2015 and the implementation of Regional Mobility Teams in response to changes in employment due to COVID-19. The Participation Act of 2015 has shifted responsibility for unemployment benefits and reintegration to municipalities, as it was argued that decentralizing unemployment assistance allows for a better-fitting approach (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2019).

On the macro level there remains a strong trilateral system consisting of an interplay between employer, employee unions, and the government. The legislative base the government provides for the collective bargaining agreement is particularly important in the centralization of labor regulation. In addition to unions and the government, the Dutch system of labor organization involves a larger number of actors or social partners. This is called the “polder model,” which was founded in temperance as a result of productive discussions and mutual dependency (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004). The social partners include the Sociaal Economische Raad (SER), an advisory council of representatives of labor unions, employer organizations, experts, and the Stichting van de Arbeid (StAr), which consists of representatives of labor unions and employer associations. The polder model is also evident in the Regional Mobility Teams (RMTs), which are a collaboration between labor unions, employer unions, municipalities, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, educational institutions, the Employees Insurance Agency (UWV), and others (Minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2020). Therefore, this development is an example of both the classic polder model, as well as the valuation of the regional scale of labor organization and accompanying decentralization.

Alongside the centralized and decentralized structures of labor organization, the branch organization remains important on the meso-level. Both workers and employers are organized through branch-specific unions, often as a subset of a national union⁴. The branch level organization concerns matters that exceed the individual firm (e.g. wage competition, education, pension plans) that benefit all firms in the branch. This comes at a cost of freedom for the individual firm (Tros et al., 2017). This is also why in the Netherlands there exists both the *vakbond* (labor union) and the *vakcentrale* (labor organization)⁵. The *vakcentrale* is a combination of the *vakbonden*, collectively identified as the *vakbeweging* (labor movement).

Finally, on the micro level large firms occasionally have a firm-specific union, often part of a larger labor organization. This often relates to (potential) negotiations for a firm-level collective bargaining agreement. Additionally, every firm with more than 50 employees is legally obligated to install a firm council⁶, which represents the workers within the firm. In firms a firm-level collective bargaining agreement can be negotiated. Theoretically, during the negotiations of collective bargaining agreements for primary labor conditions, firm councils can be appointed more power as a negotiation partner alongside the union. However Jansen, Poelstra, & Zaai (2019) found that this is rarely done and that the position of the labor union is consolidated rather than diminished, in favor of the more decentralized work council. This illustrates why understanding of the influence of scale is vital in discussions on Dutch labor organization.

2.2.2 Labor organization and union goals

Considering the context of various degrees of organization of labor in the Netherlands, a discussion of how labor unions operate within this landscape follows. Generally, the main purpose of labor unions is to improve the position of workers, primarily in negotiations with employers (Ter Steege, Van Groeninge, Kuijpers, & Van Cruchten, 2013; Boeri & Van Ours, 2013; De Beer, 2013). Labor unions allow employees to monopolize the supply of labor in a branch or industry (De Beer, 2013). Were workers not to unionize, the monopoly position of employers in the supply of labor would leave the employees in imbalanced power relations (Boeri & Van Ours, 2013). In their seminal work *What do Unions do?* Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff explore the way unions influence the labor market by arguing that unions have two “faces:” the monopoly face and the collective voice/institutional response face (1984). Unions are often critiqued for their “monopoly face” by opponents who claim unions only aim to markup wages at the expense of economic efficiency, and create (wage) inequality between unionized and non-unionized workers, thereby being socially harmful. However, Freeman & Medoff (1984) argue that if unions *only* raised wages by monopolizing labor they would not survive, as non-organized firms would outcompete organized firms. This assumes perfectly competitive markets. However, De Beer (2013) explains, the continued survival of unions indicates the product and labor market are not perfectly competitive. The lack of perfect competitiveness caused unions to develop a second face, “the collective voice/institutional response face” (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). This entails the activities of the union aimed to improve labor market efficiency through allowing workers to voice grievances while simultaneously protecting workers from repercussions. Furthermore, unions create better working and wage conditions both as a result of

⁴ For example, FNV Metaal is the labor union for workers in the metal industry sector which is part of the national labor organization FNV.

⁵ Although “labor union” refers to a subset of a labor organization, labor union is commonly used to refer to either.

⁶ ‘Ondernemingsraad’ in Dutch

informing employers on the preferences of workers as well as enforcing labor rules and regulations (ibid.).

Through its insurance that all employees are covered under union negotiations and facilitating branch-wide agreements, the government has eliminated a great number of the negative externalities of the “monopoly face” of the unions. The monopoly power of unions results in social losses with regards to efficiency, distribution of income, and social organization in favor of union members. (Freeman & Medoff, 1984). This is a clear effect of the macro-geographical scale of labor organization. While it is generally considered that representing the economic interests of workers is the primary purpose of (Dutch) labor unions, they also develop social and political activities (Van Cruchten & Kuijpers, 2007). Nevertheless, a more inclusive definition on the purpose of unions is developed as “the improvement of the societal position of all that are dependent on wages or benefits” (translated, Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004, p. 35). Thereby also including unemployed, disabled and retired persons as beneficiaries of union activities. However, unions generally acknowledge that their primary field of operations remains employment and wages (FNV, n.d.(a); CNV, n.d.; VCP, n.d.).

On the aggregate level Tros et al. (2017) categorize the role of labor unions on the labor market into two categories. First, distributive goals, which are focused on the short term and aim to increase wages and ensure job retainment. Second, productive goals which are aimed at the long term for the continuity and growth of employability, and sustainable employment of workers, e.g. through improving working conditions. Similarly, Freeman & Medoff (1984) categorized three domains of “what unions do”⁷. These are: efficiency (reduce unemployment, create better workplace practices and compensation packages and thereby increase productivity, and generally overall creating social efficiency), distribution of income (reduce wage inequality and lowering profits), and social organization (provide political voice to workers, pushing general social legislation). Similar to the conceptualization of distribution of income by Freeman & Medoff (1984) and the distributive function of union by Tros et al. (2017), Tros, Albeda & Dercksen (2004) cite the corrective purpose of unions, aimed to redistribute the division of income between capital (profit) and labor (wages) as to correct for the power of employers on the labor market. This is aimed at material interests (wage, free time, protection from firing, retirement and social security).

2.2.3 Union activities

Beyond the description of goals and purposes of unions, Tros, Albeda & Dercksen (2004) list a number of specific activities Dutch labor unions developed to achieve their goals. This list is not necessarily exhaustive. These activities of labor unions are presented in Table 2 below and categorized according to the frameworks by Freeman & Medoff (1984) and Tros et al. (2017). In the first column I have grouped activities in general themes, for a more cohesive understanding of the types of activities: governance, representation and information & education. A final theme of union activities is described by De Beer as organizing (2013). Given the declining membership numbers, labor unions are motivated to develop more activities to attract the individual worker to join the union. These activities generally include services to individual members such as advice and support. This could be on the topics of taxes, legal advice or employment conflict (see: FNV, n.d.(b)). What follows from the table is that within one theme of activity, multiple goals can be covered through various activities.

⁷ It could be argued that Freeman & Medoff are less so describing what unions *do* but focus primarily on the *effects of what unions do*.

2.2.4 Union resources

In order for the union to develop the desired activities in aid of their goals, resources are needed. As “[r]esources are the potential for actions. [...] Without assigning specific resources (both tangible and intangible), it is impossible to perform the task” (Penrose (1995), cited in Ujwary-Gil, 2019, p. 47).

Tangible resources traditionally include capital, (digital) infrastructure, and property. Intangible resources are defined by Ujwary-Gil as knowledge, skills and information (2019). As discussed before, membership is important for the acquisition of resources, as the higher the degree of membership density, the more (financial) resources (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004). This raises the question whether there is a regional variation in resources and whether that affects the (regional) operations of the FNV.

Table 2: Activities of labor unions (source: created by author).

Activity theme	Activity (adapted from Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen (2004, p. 38))	Goal(s) following F&M (1984)	Goal(s) following Tros et al. (2017)
Representation of workers	Discuss, negotiate and set contracts with employers (associations), such as the collective bargaining agreements or social plans	Distribution of income; efficiency	Both distributive and productive
Representation of workers	(Threatening) collective action against employers to influence the negotiation process	Distribution of income	Both
Representation of workers	Offering possibilities for “voice” and opinion forming of members (offering platforms for members and firm councils)	Social organization	Productive
Representation of workers	Ensuring acknowledgement from other parties as negotiation partner	Efficiency	Both
Governance	Coordination with other labor unions	Efficiency	Productive
Governance	Representation in advisory and administrative bodies and foundations on the national and branch level (e.g. education or retirement)	Social organization	Both, depending on the topic
Governance	Discuss, negotiate and sign agreements with government as governing body	Social organization	Productive
Governance	Discuss and partake with/in the organization of local organizations aimed at labor negotiations and education	Social organization	Productive
Information & education	Influence public opinion through mass media	Efficiency; social organization	Both, depending on the topic
Information & education	Advise, distribution of information and other types of (legal) services to members, firm stewards (‘kaderleden’) and firm councils	Efficiency	Productive
Organizing (see: de Beer, 2013)	Services to individual members	Efficiency	Productive

2.3 Union organization

2.3.1 Degree of fit and organizational structure

Finally, while goals, activities, and resources affect the external operations of the labor union, this should fit with the internal organizational structure of the labor union. This has been explored by Warner (1972) in his publication on trade unions and organizational theory, referring to this as the *degree of fit* between the organizational structure and its operations. He identifies the spheres of organization of the union. Relevant in this context are the core structure of the union and the environment in which it is embedded. Furthermore, Warner distinguishes between the formal organization structure of the union and its informal counterpart. The informal organizational structure of unions allows them to adapt to changes in the environment and subsequent changes in its operations. Warner underscores the value of the informal structure in its elasticity and flexibility, but cautions for a too large discrepancy between the formal and informal structure. Important in the formal organizational structure of the FNV is the collective of sectoral unions which operate within the larger union. How this influences the core structure of the union in relation to its regional operations will be explored in the data collection of this research. Finally, as the FNV is a democratic association where strategies and goals are determined in a member parliament, it is expected the membership base influences the core structure of its organization to fit these strategies.

2.3.2 Environment and transitions

Similarly to how the goals of the union provide the ideological mandate by which the union operates, the external environment (primarily economic and political) of the union provides the socio-political-legal mandate by which the union organizes. Again, this is embedded in the structure of labor relations in the Netherlands, particularly since the developments after the Akkoord van Wassenaar. De Beer (2013) cites the wage reductionist policies as well as the decrease in union membership as the most notable developments in the labor relations since the Akkoord. However, these developments cannot solely be ascribed to the Akkoord, as other countries experienced similar trends. Nevertheless, these trends highlight the effect the position and influence of the union have, and can thereby be considered examples of a zeitgeist that is unfavorable to unions, but in favor of employers (ibid). This affected the role of the union in the labor organization in the Netherlands.

Furthermore, the influence of the external environment on the internal organization of the union depends on both environmental complexity and environmental variability (Warner, 1972). Environmental *complexity* affects unions, particularly due to the heterogeneity of the environmental factors that affect the extensive organization that is a union. In the Dutch context this can be considered to include the multitude of actors and scales involved in labor regulation. Environmental *variability* is the degree of change in environmental factors that affect its functions, such as economic and political changes or changes in the labor market (ibid). Therefore, while the environmental complexity includes the range of factors (or actors) that affect the operation of the union, the environmental variability describes whether their influence is constant or changing. The success of the organizational structure of the union in its adaptation to the environment depends, according to Warner (1972), on both the resources the organization can employ to monitor changes in its environment as well as the organizational time lag; the amount of time the organization needs to adjust to changes.

2.3.3 Decentralization and its benefits

Increased regional organization on the part of the union could potentially allow the union to adapt to a more decentralized governance structure. The various relevant (dis)advantages of decentralization of governance have been described by Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney. They found that decentralization might be beneficial as a policy, which might better reflect territorial preferences (tailoring) and because

democratic accountability on a smaller scale can improve policy efficiency and foster innovation (2017, p. 165, Table 4.3). However, additional layers of institution can add additional administrative cost, deter scale economies in policy formulation and implementation, and can reduce coordination with the national territory and possibly create negative spillover effects (ibid.).

This should be considered in light of the various causes identified by Been et al. (2019), that have led to a decline in membership numbers in the past years. Both labor and the labor market have been subjected to change from “traditional” work, defined by long term employment by a single company in favor of individualization, and flexibilization of work, defined by short term contracts, self-employment, or platform gigs. Generally, the flexibilization of work and the correlated individualization of labor have led to an increased heterogeneity of workers interests, and subsequent need for the union to develop their activities accordingly (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Van der Laan, 1993; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019). Simultaneously, there is the increasing need for *organizing* activities (De Beer, 2013). As the union needs to attract new members, the specialization enjoyed by decentralization might be beneficial to tailor to the needs of the marginal worker. Finally, earlier mentioned trends of decentralization and deregulation (Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019; de Beer, 2013) present both environmental variabilities, as well as potential environmental complexity due to an increase or change in partner organizations as the result of the polder model.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework that follows the theoretical framework.

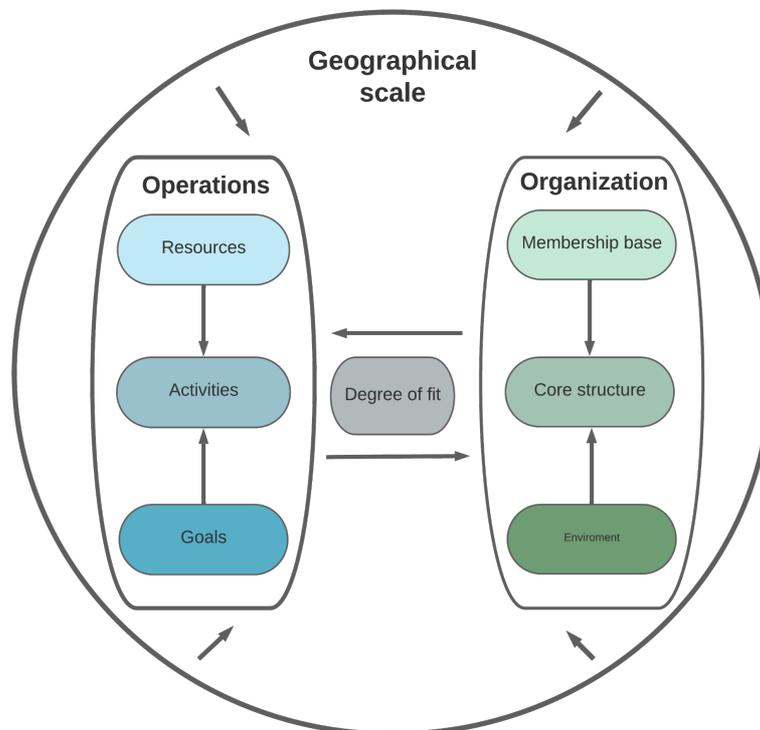


Figure 2: Conceptual framework (source: created by author).

The model displays the main concepts that follow the literature review. Primarily, the conceptual framework displays the division between the external operations and internal organization of the labor union. Thereby, the model follows the work of Warner (1972) who made this distinction between the operations and organizations of trade unions, as explored in section 2.3.1 of this chapter. From the same publication, it follows that the degree of fit is the degree to which the organization, particularly its core structure, matches the nature of the operations of the union. I suspect this relationship is symbiotic, ergo both the core structure can influence the operations, which means the change in operations can lead to the organization (specifically the core structure) to adapt. Additionally, I suspect that the operations, in particular the activities, follow from how the core structure is organized. The core structure includes a formal and informal structure, where the latter, when complimentary to the former, can increase the degree of fit. However, considering the FNV is a democratic association, I suspect the membership base is a part of the organization that could potentially influence its core structure. The member parliament of the FNV can decide the long-term strategy of the FNV and vote on decisions of the board. It is made up of representatives of associated unions that make up the labor organization. Considering the FNV is a democratic association, it follows that the membership base is interlinked with the core structure of the union. The relationship between the membership base and the core structure is suspected to be influenced by the traditional sectoral structure of the FNV, as this relates to both the membership base and the core structure as members are always assigned to one sector. Together with the sectoral system, this makes up a large part of the organizational structure of the union. Under the main concept of 'environment' the sub concepts of environmental complexity and variability are included. I suspect the influence of external heterogeneity and stability, as described in section 2.3.1 of this chapter, can pressure the FNV to adapt its core structure to external trends in the sphere of labor. Furthermore, it is expected the same holds also for relevant socio-political-economic trends such as the ones described in section 2.3.3. This will be linked to the multi-scalar and multi-actor landscape of labor organization as described in section 2.2.1, as this fragmented landscape presents environmental complexity, and developments within it present environmental variability.

The link between organization and operations exists across the various subsections. For example, the membership base relates to resources: it provides capital through membership fees (section 2.1.1). Furthermore from section 2.2.4 it follows that resources can include, alongside capital, (digital) infrastructure, property, as well as intangible resources such as knowledge, skills and information. As the resources are the potential for actions, it follows they influence the activities of the union. The activities of the union have been summarized in Table 2, but primarily include representation of workers, governance, information and education, and organizing. It follows that the activities of the union are influenced by the larger goals of the union. Possible goals of labor unions are described in section 2.2.2 and include the distributive and productive goals described by Tros et al. (2017) and/or the goals of efficiency, distribution of income and social organization as described by Freeman & Medoff (1984).

Finally, the model shows how both the operations and organization of the union are embedded in the geographical scale, and present a bilateral relationship between the geographical context and the union as well. This relates to the various scales of labor organization (macro, meso, micro) described in section 2.2.1, as well as the relation between the union and the region, particularly the regional variation in union density explored in section 2.1.3. Furthermore, the relation between the geographical scale and the labor union includes the benefits and disadvantages of decentralization following Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney (2017). The benefits include tailoring, democratic accountability and efficiency, and the disadvantages include administrative cost, the detriments to economies of scale, reduced coordination and negative spillover effects as described in 2.3.3.

The conceptual framework will be used to develop the interview guide, which serves as an instrument for data collection, to ensure the theoretical foundation of the empirical data collection. This framework allows the exploration of the presence of theoretical concepts in the reality of the case study.

Methodology

In this chapter I will detail the methodology of the data collection. First, I discuss how the data collection relates to the research goals as well as the literature review. Second, I present relevant background on the FNV to contextualize the selection of this case for this research. Thereafter, I elaborate on the data collection and analysis process, where I explain how the interviews are conducted and what was done with the collected information. Finally, I discuss the process of conducting this research and its ethics.

3.1. Research design

3.1.1 Research goals

The conceptual framework in the previous chapter illustrated how I consider the FNV to be the sum of both its operations and organization, and how both are embedded in the geographical context. The explored operations include its goals, activities, and resources. The organization is explored by its environment, core structure, and membership base. By developing the interview guide based on these elements from the literature, an instrument for data collection was created that allows to answer the research question: *how does the regional scale influence the operations and organization of the FNV in the Netherlands?* By employing this interview guide, the influence of the regional scale is explored in the interviews by asking how the union is organized and how it operates in the region of the interviewee. This answers the first sub-question: *is there a regional component in the organization of the FNV, and if so why?* By interviewing participants from different regions, this will answer the second sub-question: *are there differences in regional organization and operations within the FNV, and if so how can these be explained?* Finally, to understand how the environment (as conceptualized in the model) influences the FNV as well as the influence of other geographical scales the third sub-question will be explored: *how do changes in (regional) labor and (regional) labor organization in the Netherlands affect the FNV?*

3.1.2 Case study: FNV

I focus on analyzing the regional activities and organization of the largest union in the Netherlands, the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV), as a case study. In 2021, 916.000 of the total 1.500.000 union members in the Netherlands were a member of the FNV (CBS, 2021). The history of the FNV is characterized by mergers of various (often sectoral) unions and organizations. This relates to how, in the Dutch labor organization, there is a difference between the labor organization as a whole, the '*vakcentrale*', and the individual unions, '*vakbonden*', as well as sectoral unions within this organization. Combined, they constitute the FNV. The history of the FNV can be traced back to the foundation of the labor organizations NVV in 1906, and a predecessor of the NKV in 1909. These organizations were characterized by their respective ideologies. However, following the depillarisation there emerged a more collaborative environment. This ultimately resulted in a federation between the NVV and the NKV in 1976, which became the FNV. Subsequently, this later led to a fully integrated merger between the two organizations (see: Ter Steege, Van Groenigen, Kuijpers, & Van Cruchten (2013)).

Van Gelder (n.d.) illustrates how, throughout its history, the FNV has been adapting to the changes in the (sectoral) structure of the labor market and the changing character of work. Employment within one sector, and being employed in a single job for multiple decades have become increasingly rare over time. Furthermore, increased flexibilization, part-time work and decreasing attractiveness of the union for non-traditional union members (e.g. women, minorities) inspired the vision for structural reorganization in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This was established in the report *FNV 2000* in 1987, detailing the need to adapt to the changing labor market, but also during the congress of FNV Bouw (construction) 2009. The congress called for the exploration of full-scale collaboration between FNV organizations. Ultimately this laid the foundation of the most recent merger in 2015 between FNV Bouw, FNV Bondgenoten (which was the result of a previous merger of the transport, industry, and service unions, amongst others), ABVAKABO (for the public sector) and FNV Sport. Important in this merger was creating an internal organization structure that allowed for cooperation, but simultaneously allowed for the autonomy of the various unions to remain sound.

The exploratory discussions with members of the FNV found that currently, there are 6 regions within the FNV, who all have their own regional office: North (Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe), East (Overijssel, Gelderland), Central (Flevoland, Utrecht + the city Hilversum), Northwest (North-Holland), Southwest (South-Holland, Zeeland) and Southeast (Limburg, Noord-Brabant). This regional division of the FNV was used as the basis in order to compare the various regional activities of the union.

3.1.3 Data collection

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals from within the FNV, who concern themselves with the operations and organization of the union on the regional level. Through snowball sampling, starting at the network of the researcher's supervisor, relevant individuals from within the organization were contacted. People who actively operate and organize on the regional level were selected, to ensure an "inside looking in" and an "inside looking out" perspective on the various levels of labor organization. This was done to maintain the regional scale as the primary focus of the research. The semi-structured interview guide allowed to capture a range of viewpoints and experiences, while maintaining the freedom to address regional variation within the organization. This simultaneously ensures consistency to reach a degree of saturation in the data collected. The interview guide is presented in Appendix B (p. 45-48). Seven individuals from within the FNV participated in six interviews that ranged from 60 to 120 minutes. Five out of the six FNV regions were included.⁸ Four interviews were conducted at one of the regional offices of the FNV, one was conducted telephonically and one through Microsoft Teams. In total, a little under eight hours of interviews were conducted. The interviews were recorded with the mobile phone of the researcher and were later transcribed for analysis. Interviews were conducted in Dutch.

3.1.4 Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both inductive and deductive coding (see coding scheme in Appendix C, p. 49-50). Analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti, with multiple rounds of coding in order to reach saturation in the analysis of the data. Additionally, publicly available policy documents from the FNV were consulted, particularly the Multiannual Policy 2022-2025 (FNV, 2022a) and its strategic vision on its role in the regional labor market (FNV, 2022b) and the description of the legal organization structure (FNV, 2022c). These were consulted to triangulate the collected data.

⁸ Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview someone from the region Southwest within the time limitations of this research.

3.2 Research process

3.2.1 Scoping and verifying the research

As the internal organization of the FNV can be somewhat diffuse to outsiders, three exploratory conversations were conducted with individuals holding various positions throughout the FNV. The contacted individuals were part of the network of the researcher and the supervisor. The conversations served an exploratory purpose and were not part of the data collection, as they were all from the region North and including them in the data collection would result in overrepresentation of this research. Their sole purpose was to get an understanding of the organization and its structure, its operations, and general trends that affect it. This was done to specify the scope of the research and to ground the research within the working practice of the FNV. After the first draft was completed, I sent a copy of the paper to one of the research participants to present the results, specifically to verify and correct any misunderstandings with regards to the organization structure and development of the FNV.

3.2.2 Research ethics

To ensure participants felt comfortable discussing the practices of the organization, personal and professional characteristics of the participants in the research process were anonymized. However, some participants explicitly expressed being comfortable with their job title being used in the results of this paper. Participants were able to withdraw from the research, both during and after the interview process, without stating a reason. Upon request, transcripts were provided for approval. To prevent data leakage, interview transcripts are stored under pseudonym only and the original recordings are stored on the personal password protected computer of the researcher and an external hard drive. The recordings are available only to the researcher and their supervisor. The data is stored for one year after the completion of the research. Before the interview, an information sheet explaining the research and data collection process was provided to participants to ensure informed consent. The data is collected only for this research project and (potential) subsequent publications.

Results

This chapter will discuss the results of the data collection in relation to its theoretical framework. The conceptual framework presented in section 2.4 was used as a foundation to explore the regional organization and operation of the FNV. This chapter starts with a discussion of the organizational elements of the FNV (environment, core structure, membership) in sections 4.1 to 4.3. Thereafter, I will discuss the operational side of the FNV (activities, resources, goals) in sections 4.4 to 4.6. Finally, I conclude in section 4.7 with a discussion of the regional geographical scale and how this relates to other regional scales, to embed the results in the context of the multi-scalar structure of labor regulation in the Netherlands. In this section I also discuss the influence of the regional context and identity. Throughout this chapter, the empirical findings are connected to their relevant academic literature from the theoretical framework.

4.1 Core structure explained

This section will first discuss the various elements of the core structure, starting with the formal (legal) structure which leads into a discussion of the informal structure. As discussed in the methodology, the organization FNV is quite diffuse to outsiders therefore the first section of the results discusses its formal core structure as it was understood from the interviews and policy documents. The informal organization structure is partially related to the desired cross-sectoral collaboration within the FNV, which was found to be a goal of formalizing the regional/local activities (FNV, 2022a).

4.1.1 Formal core structure.

The FNV is legally regarded as an association. It is both a labor union where natural persons are divided into twelve sectors, as well as a labor organization where legal persons, representing eleven independent unions, are members (FNV, 2022c). The FNV has a general board, a daily board, a member parliament (general members assembly) and a 'work organization' with a director (ibid, p. 1). The member parliament consists of representatives of all the sectors and the independent unions, and is a democratic instrument. A visualization of this is presented in Appendix D.1 (p. 52). The member parliament gets its operational mandate from its by-laws and serves to set the goals and directions of the FNV.

The work organization of the FNV includes its paid employees. They serve, under supervision of their director, to work towards the goals set out by the association in the member parliament. The director is hierarchically below the daily board. This work organization includes a total of approximately 1500 FTE, across +/- 1700 employees (FNV, 2022c). This thesis focuses on the work organization within the association FNV. Since the member parliament is organized sectoral, and the regional teams and efforts are part of the work organization, this makes the work organization relevant to the scope of this research. Hereafter, I will discuss the work organization, unless stated otherwise.

The FNV is organized in six regions. Each of the six regions has a team under supervision of a team leader for the development of its collective regional activities. This entails that the team leader of the region is hierarchically responsible for the local and regional efforts. Currently, the team 'regional collective,' as it is called within the FNV, includes consultants that are part of the Regional Mobility Teams (see section

4.2.1 (p. 24) for a detailed explanation of the Regional Mobility Teams) and the organization of the regional labor market, and other regional governance structures. Prior to the 2015 merger of the various unions into the FNV in 2015 (see: 3.1.2, p. 18), 'local/regional' was a separate entity within the FNV, or part of the regional (socio-economic) organization of the individual sectoral unions. After the subsequent reorganization the team leaders of the regional teams became the direct colleagues of the team leaders of the various sectors, to aid cross-sectoral collaboration. The regional teams have since experienced a high degree of freedom to design their operations, thereby they are continuously in development. One of the developments was that after an internal organization in April 2022 the team leaders are now formally called 'team leaders' rather than their former title 'regional coordinators.' Although some opt to address themselves as 'regional leader.'

Aside from the collective activities in the region, each region has activities targeted at individual members by the team IB&D⁹. This branch concerns themselves with the local union houses (35 throughout the Netherlands) and services to individual members, such as tax support and legal representation. These services often operate from the local union locations.¹⁰ To illustrate this, an organizational chart of the regional office North is attached in Appendix D.2 (p. 52) as an (simplified) example of what this looks like in the region. While different regions home different sectors, it was reported by one of the participants that this structure is similar across regions. However, the style of working and collaboration could differ depending on the individuals within the office and its traditions.

However, the regional organization of the FNV is not a given. Interviewees expressed that they sometimes had to make efforts to convince the centralized organization of the FNV of the value of decentralized organization. They also expressed that centralization and decentralization are cyclical trends that are experienced within all types of companies. One interviewee said the following on this matter: *"and you often see that in firms, that... either everything has to be centralized and tightly controlled and planned, and at other times everything has to be very decentralized... and a lot of freedom has to be given. And when it goes wrong somewhere... you see that the trend shifts the other way."* Another interviewee stated that the FNV experiences a degree of organizational time lag in adjusting to these trends: *"Everyone is transitioning to regional. And now you see our employer is steering towards centralization [...] and there we try, from within our region, to influence that of course. [...] So we are not only fighting the outside. But also inside. To prove why we have to have an office here. Why we have to keep the regional knowledge here."* This is important, as the degree of centralization or decentralization of the FNV as a whole is presumed to affect the operational strength of their regional departments. By increasing the operational strength of the regional teams and offices, the FNV can increase their degree of fit, as explained by Warner (1972), to their regional activities.

4.1.2 Cross-sectoral collaboration and informal organization structure

In reference to the work of Warner (1972), the cross-sectoral collaboration within the FNV links the formal and informal structure of the FNV. It is part of the formal core structure, as it is a goal of the association FNV to increase cross-sectoral collaboration by making use of the regional collective teams. The regional teams are not authorized to make decisions for the sectors and their teams. These decisions

⁹ IB&D is an acronym for Individuele Belangenbehartiging en Dienstverlening, which translates to Individual Advocacy and Services.

¹⁰ While a large part of these services is offered by volunteering (trained) members from the association FNV, they are facilitated in housing, ICT, etc. by the employment organization FNV.

are made only in collaboration with the sectoral teams. However, there is a high degree of freedom on the part of the teams and team leaders as to how the collaboration is shaped.

Nevertheless, the regions recognize the value of cross-sectoral collaboration within the union. This is further acknowledged in the policy documents, which state: *“At this time there is still little union work that is aimed at the connection between sectors and regions, campaigns and local”* (translated, FNV, 2022b, p. 17). Interviewees voiced that they feel their position allows them to connect various people within the organization of FNV, and offer their support to sectors where needed. This was for example mentioned by the team leader of region North in the context of strikes: *“Everyone comes to me in the North when they need support. Because most of the time you only have one negotiator on a case. And the moment you go on strike, you have multiple locations that go on strike. So everything comes to me, and I arrange with the coworkers then, like ‘guys, who is available when, and who can support where.’”* Placing the regional teams parallel to - rather than separate from - the sectoral teams was done to support regional (cross-sectoral) collaboration. The response of the team leader of region North shows that they consider that their position indeed enables them in this support. This formalization of cross-sectoral activities through regional organization is important, as the union as an organization is to this day a collective of various sectoral unions.

Furthermore, this cross-sectoral approach was utilized in the matter of the expansion of Schiphol Airport in the region Northwest. The sector executives were involved, but cross-sectoral collaboration was conducted as well. Additionally, it was related to the regional labor market. A participant from the region Northwest explained this involvement of various stakeholders and topics as follows:

“What that whole situation means with regards to, uh, too few and overburdened employees. That is of course a matter for what [is decided] within Schiphol as a company through a sectoral management. But when it concerns, overarching, the inflow of people within that kind of employment, when it concerns flex jobs, when it-, when it concerns structural working conditions in general- What kind of education programs are connected to it. Are there shortages in a certain sector? Or maybe an excess. To anticipate that, those are the cross-sectoral topics we concern ourselves with.”

The example of Schiphol also shows the importance of the various sectors in the socio-economic landscape of the region. It was reported by a participant from the region Southeast that good cross-sectoral involvement can aid the development of regional economic policy. However, they said this has for a large part declined in favor of the (individual) sectoral focus. Interviewees expressed that cross-sectoral collaboration presents regional variation, which indicates this relates to the informal structure of the organization, or rather what Warner describes as quasi-formal (1972, p. 48).

In some regions there is a history of cross-sectoral collaboration, where there are close links between various employees of differing departments within the region. It was reported by an interviewee of region North that: *“we can find each other very well in the North, that is not always the case everywhere”*. The close contacts between the FNV in the region, were commented on by interviewees from within and outside the region (Center and Southeast). This shows the (cross-sectoral) collaboration within the region has been recognized throughout the organization. However, as there is no formalized collaboration structure, this is also dependent on the tradition of informal collaboration within the region. While this tradition was strong in region North, this did not exist in region Center, as explained by an interviewee: *“Center did not have that, let’s say, the infrastructure that there were already years of some sort of intensive contacts [in the region], so with that I am still in the buildup phase.”*

Some interviewees acknowledged the value of the informal collaboration structure within the organization structure, particularly on the regional scale: *“That is the power of a region- when you can connect fast, and only have to inform me.”* Another regional leader commented that maintaining those informal connections is a vital part of their job in the region: *“at the coffee machine, you simply hear more. And you talk easier, you exchange information way easier. When you haven’t seen each other for a while... you don’t pick up the phone that easily... simply to ask... ‘hey, what is going on in your job?’ [...] so that’s focused and actively managing your relations, that is something I do in my position.”* It was also commented by the interviewees, in varying degrees, that informal contacts are a natural part of every organization. They are often formed by professional interest, and in the case of the FNV, potentially also solidarity ideals. As long as it does not disrupt the formal organization, interviewees see no problem in its existence.

4.2 Environment

4.2.1 Environmental variety

The policy documents of the organization mention that the FNV is reconsidering its organization, both internally and externally, to adapt to changes in the labor market and its infrastructure (FNV, 2022a; FNV, 2022b). Their vision on their future position in the regional labor market identifies various transitions (flexibilization of labor, economic and technological transitions) and a window of opportunity to align these transitions with the values of the FNV for work and workers (FNV, 2022b). This is part of their formal strategy *FNV Toekomstvast*¹¹ (‘FNV Futureproof’), and was also expressed in the interviews: *“Because that whole infrastructure that is now... in the regions... how do you say?- is being designed. And you just have to be there, right at the start”*. This shows the urgency the FNV feels to be present at the primary stages of the redesign of the regional labor market infrastructure. The development of a strategy for the regional labor market is developed in consideration of the potential created by the Coalition Agreement 2022-2026. The agreement states that the labor market infrastructure should be expanded to create easier transitions between employment, but also from unemployment to employment (cited in FNV, 2022b, p. 8). It was developed in the SER advice to create a more agile labor market with solid conditions to ensure social-economic security (Sociaal-Economische Raad, 2021)¹². Both the coalition agreement and the SER advice ensure an external socio-political mandate for the increased position of the FNV on the regional labor market, and internally the FNV aims to adjust to this transition (FNV, 2022b).

Preceding this current development in the labor market infrastructure that led the FNV to redevelop and reconsider its position was historic legislation that started the decentralization of the labor market regulation. It was noted by the participants that an important political development was the repeal of the *Wet Sociale Werkvoorziening* (‘Law for Sheltered Employment’) in 2015, which was then replaced by the earlier mentioned Participation Act. However, a more influential development for the decentralization of the labor market was reported (both in policy documents as well as by participants) to be in 2013 with the *Sociaal Akkoord* (‘Social Agreement’). In the agreement it was decided that 125.000 *garantiebanen* (‘guaranteed jobs’) would be created to employ those who struggle to find traditional employment due

¹¹ This strategy is not publicly available, but referred to in other policy documents (FNV, 2022a; FNV, 2022b).

¹² see also: FNV (2022, p.8)

to an ‘employment disability.’ The Social Agreement formalized the regional labor market structure by mandating that 35 regional *werkbedrijven* (‘work firms’) would be created, where collaboration between various social partners would take place to realize the employment of the target group.¹³ This collaboration was later further formalized by its legislation in Law SUWI¹⁴. Participants reported that the Social Agreement of 2013 was the catalyst for the FNV to partake in the regional labor market infrastructure through these regional work firms, and in every work firm there is (still) a FNV board member (FNV, 2022b). The regional work firms evolved to take on a bigger role in the regional labor market policy beyond the *garantiebanen*, although interviewees stated that there are regional variations as to how this is realized.

More recently, the regional labor market infrastructure has developed further with the addition of the Regional Mobility Teams (RMTs). The RMTs were created as a collaborative effort of social and (semi-) governmental partners to help those who became unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic transition to new employment. The RMTs gained a structural mandate in 2022 and will develop into Regional *Werkcentra* (‘work centers’)¹⁵. The RMTs were often cited, both in policy documents and throughout the interviews, to be an important development of the position of the FNV on the regional labor market. Furthermore, this led to the allocation of funds to the social partners (and thus FNV) to improve the labor market infrastructure. Participants reported that these funds allowed them to expand their organization to increase their efforts in the regional labor market structure. With the availability of these additional funds, the regional labor market infrastructure is suspected to grow and become increasingly instrumental to exert influence on employment in the region. This explains the urgency the FNV feels to develop its position within it.

Thereby, the implementation of the Social Agreement in 2013 and the creation of RMTs during the pandemic are an example of the development of the FNV in the region through the regional labor market infrastructure. The high degree of freedom on part of the regional teams result in increased fluidity to adapt to a changing external environment. This fluidity indeed allows regional teams to increase its degree of fit which supports the findings of Warner (1972). This was seen in particular by the (increased) opportunity to intersect the FNV into the infrastructure of the regional labor market, as well as the regional governance structures.

4.2.2 Environmental complexity

The previous section established why the regional labor market infrastructure, and the decentralization of this through the Social Agreement and RMTs, have been relevant for the increased importance of regional organization of the union. Central in both the Social Agreement and the RMTs are the collaboration amongst a large number of social partners. As a result, I found that the regional labor market is a very diffuse and fragmented landscape, which involves a large number of parties. Often mentioned by participants to be involved in governance landscape was the ‘triple helix’, which includes government, educational institutions and entrepreneurs/employers¹⁶. Government here consists of

¹³ See also: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stb-2014-366.html> for a more detailed explanation of the Social Agreement of 2013.

¹⁴ *Wet Structuur Uitvoeringsorganisatie Werk en Inkomen* or ‘Law Structure of the Executive Organization for Work and Income’ in English, cited in FNV (2022b, p. 5)

¹⁵ This is the current working title for these centers, but it was reported the name is not final per se.

¹⁶ In Dutch, the ‘triple helix’ was said to include the three O’s of Overheid, Onderwijs and Ondernemers.

provincial and municipal governments, but also executive organizations such as UWV. This exemplifies how the multitude of parties led to a fragmented governance landscape, which was also said to be a result of the 35 different regional labor markets:

“it is a pretty fragmented landscape [...] Well, if you look at the labor market, all those that are involved in that, those are local governments, those are employers, those are employees, those are educational institutions, that is the UWV, that is- There are so many parties involved [...] In Center you have four regional labor markets, so you have to deal with all those parties in four different places. And there we have to fight for our position as a union. Because well yes, not everyone finds it equally self-evident, however you do want to take part in such a board, or foundation or project. And yes that is a complicated path.”

However, outside of the regional labor market infrastructure, the FNV also partakes in other regional governance structures. The decision as to which governance structures the FNV should partake in, is primarily at the discretion of the regional teams and their team leaders. They experience a high degree of freedom in deciding which regional collaborations are fruitful. They decide based on the amount of influence they can exert, whether this fits the goals and values of the FNV, and whether it is generally expected to be a productive use of resources. Someone from region East reported: *“We actually do want to take on projects if we can ensure that we are then also ‘in the lead’, that we can help decide what we are doing. And that it does not interfere with our values.”* While originally part of the interview guide, it proved impossible to provide a fully comprehensive scope of all the regional governance structures the FNV takes part in in all the regions, as there are too many to provide an extensive overview of for all the regions.

However, it is worthwhile to consider to what extent the fragmented regional governance structure is the result of environmental complexity as a result of the historic tradition of the polder model, or as a result of environmental variability due to increased decentralization. The importance of the RMTs is indicative of the latter, however, it could be a combination of the two. In any case, the FNV has attempted to increase its organizational degree of fit towards these regional operations by formalizing its regional strategy as presented in their policy documents and with the creation of a formal regional team (FNV, 2022a; FNV, 2022b). The increased formalization of the regional scale within the FNV allows it to decrease its organizational time lag, as described by Warner (1972). The same goes for the regional governance activities of the FNV, which are region-specific and partially the result of path-dependency, such as the existence of regional SER's (see also section 4.7.2, p. 34).

4.3 Membership

4.3.1 Decline in membership

The previous section discussed how formalizing the position of the FNV in the regional labor market infrastructure is part of a strategy to, literally, ensure it is future proof. A second part of the increased regional organization and operation of the union involves their aim to increase visibility to existing and potential members (FNV, 2022a). This should be considered in light of the confirmation by the interviewees that the union has experienced a decline in membership, for one due to aging: *“Now I have to say, we have, like all associations in the Netherlands, experienced a terrible dip [in membership numbers]. The aging also struck us.”* Alongside the effects of aging, various participants expressed that the “traditional” image of the union is something that no longer resonates with parts of the contemporary workforce. The changing character of employment compels them to adapt. This is mostly

towards young people, but also towards the flexibilization and individualization of work, and how the union positions itself towards new issues and represent its ideals and values in this new context:

“But young people indeed, they just have a different idea. They want way more balance between work and their personal life. They no longer want to... that 36 or 40 hours... per week for their employer. They simply don’t want that anymore. So that idea of the world is different. [...] and there you have to adapt as a union. To see where are then... the concerns of young people. And how can we... support and help... those young people with the matters they will encounter then.”

Another interviewee said: *“the image of that union is still that of white men, too fat bellies, wearing a cap, campaigning, and then they [young people] find out what we actually all do.”* And another also connected the heterogeneity of the workforce to the aging of the FNV: *“but you also have to deal with... aging within the FNV. The classic image... of the white man... of 50 plus years. [...] It is becoming way more diverse that image. And that is what we want of course. Also because the Netherlands has become way more diverse... and also other groups should be taken into account. You also have to matter to them. We have FNV Young & United to... a club to... reach primarily those young people... to make them excited. Those that often don’t think about their future, their retirement and those kinds of things.”*

Nevertheless, interviewees also expressed that recently membership numbers have started to rise again, as was also reported in the media this year (NRC, 2023; RTL Nieuws, 2023). One of the reasons for the recent rise in membership mentioned in the interviews was to the increased precarity of workers, which was cynically mentioned as an effect of political leadership on the national level: *“The union was no longer sexy. Everything was secured through the polder [model], the polder took care of everything. And twelve years of Cabinet Rutte¹⁷ served us well, they left everything to the private sector. And when you leave things to the private sector, then you know where costs are being reduced. That is the factor of labor, that is where the cuts are made”*. This shows that while ‘the polder’, the collective insurance of good working conditions through collaboration of the social partners, has indeed presented the free-rider problem that reduced membership, which scholars warned for (De Beer, 2013; Been, Keune, & Tros, 2019; CBS, 2021a; Tros, Albeda, & Dercksen, 2004). However, the liberalization of wage politics in the past decade, this interviewee claimed, has led to a decline in wages which caused people to (re)join the union as they strengthen the position of workers.

4.3.2 Collectivity and regional context

Contrasting the statement that the union needs to reinvent itself to be attractive to the contemporary workforce, region North acknowledged that there is still a strong socio-historic tradition of union membership out of collective ideology. This was reported by interviewees from that region. One interviewee in region North stated: *“historically we have been more traditional and are lagging a bit behind the rest of the country, so to say. So passing it [union membership] from generation to generation comes more naturally here than in the Randstad”*. Other regions expressed to be aware of the high degree of organization in the Northern regions as well. This confirmed socio-historic tradition of union membership in the North concurs the findings by Van Der Laan (1993), who claimed that social relations in the region should be explored to understand discrepancies in union density, alongside universal predicting variables, as the socio-historical spatial context of the region influences union membership.

¹⁷ Prime-minister Mark Rutte is currently head of his fifth consecutive cabinet in twelve years. The cabinet is named for the prime-minister (with a roman numeral in case a prime-ministers has served multiple cabinets).

The social-spatial relations that affect the FNV in the region North are more elaborately discussed in section 4.7 (p. 33) of this chapter.

This strong notion of collectivity in region North is said to be unique in the region. An interviewee in region East stated that they considered that both collective ideals, as well the question of ‘what’s in it for me?’ can be an incentive to join the union, and it depends on the individual whether one or the other is more prominent. However, they considered the sectoral structure and business organization in the region to be primarily influential on membership in the region. This was also found in region Southeast, where a high degree of distribution centers that employ migrant workers – a type of employee that was expressed to be traditionally hard to organize – affects membership density in the region. In region Northeast, it is considered that the high degree of flexible work amongst young people meant they could profile themselves on topics that speak to this demographic. However, that did not necessarily mean they also became members of the union. In region Center the interviewee said that the degree of organization was low compared to the density of the population, and increased local and regional visibility of the union could potentially alleviate this. The same interviewee raised the question “what’s in it for me?” (this exact phrasing was used by two interviewees) as well, in relation to the changes in the labor market:

“We have never had so many self-employed people in this country before. And well yes, that is something very different. When you’re self-employed, then is your-, your thinking about a union is very different of course, then if you, well, work a more traditional job in a factory, or in an office, or in a store [...] and to be a member out of solidarity. No, ‘what’s in it for me?’ So yes, the zeitgeist has changed, and with that, yes, we have to adapt.”

The question of ‘what is in it for me’ to join a union is, arguably, evidence of a notion of contemporary collectivity, where the collective is supported by servicing individual members. Interviewees said that services to individual members as well as potential members were found to be helpful to increase membership, thereby serving to organize as was argued by De Beer (2013). These services to (potential) members, an interviewee expressed, are particularly effective when the FNV offers unbiased expertise: *“when you show you are an expert on many areas, when you can do that- but servicing needs of individual members- and that is also shown in the career services... those RMTs showed that. What people recognize in the FNV is... it only has one interest, and that is my interest”*. The services to individual members are also offered, as previously mentioned, in the local union houses which makes them part of the local/regional efforts of the FNV. This combination of individual services near members further adds to increased visibility (FNV, 2022a). Generally, all interviewees acknowledged that increased visibility was a major advantage of the increased regional activity of the FNV. In region Southeast for example, an interviewee said that this was also necessary: *“but, most people simply don’t know... know what we do. As a matter of fact, some of my colleagues don’t even know... what all we do includes”*. A similar sentiment was expressed by a regional leader, in their explanation of how the activities of the regional teams are now woven into various places within the organization of the FNV: *“that did not come naturally, but we had to push to make that happen. Because often... in a centralized organization... [...] There will always be a difference... between the headquarters... and the region, that is always the case. That is not FNV specific, per se. But we have been pushing very hard to at least... bring those together”*. However, increased visibility does not only take place on the local or regional scale, as an interviewee in region East expressed: *“we do see that increasingly more young people join the union. Because they see, that we do other things, and with those climate campaigns we are visible too.”* This local visibility could be considered an example of democratic accountability, which is a benefit of decentralization as argued by Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney (2017). But this also goes to show that while organizing activities are

described by De Beer (2013) as services to the individual member, organizing is also done through collective efforts and campaigns.

4.4 Activities

The previous section discussed how visibility and organizing are important tools for the FNV to maintain and increase membership considering the contemporary labor market and its development. This section further elaborates these and other activities of the FNV in the regions. Important in the development of the local and regional activities are the local networks. The interviews showed that the regional teams are tasked with supporting the networks of local active members (or firm stewards)¹⁸ from the association FNV, which are grouped geographically. These local networks vary in size based on the number of available volunteers in a given region. There are multiple of these networks in a region, organized by ZIP codes (region Center has 9, for example). All local networks have a budget based on the number of members in their area.

One of the participants stated that members become active either via themes¹⁹ and topics that interest them or by taking on more union work in the context of the firm where they work. They also stated that in the regional organization it is important to connect with what is relevant to the members. This illustrates the added value of tailoring as a result of decentralization as described by Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney (2017). The availability of local active members was expressed by an interviewee to affect the FNV's local degree of activity. The local networks under the supervision of the regional teams have a couple of tasks. These will be briefly discussed in the following sections.

4.4.1 Jubilees

Local networks organize the celebrations of jubilees of the association. Where the other activities of the network have some degree of freedom as to if and how they are organized, the celebration of jubilees are a standardized task of the local network, but the festivities differ depending on the length of membership and age of the member (elder members are visited in their homes, for example).

4.4.2 Services

Local networks are involved with the support of the services to individual members, by facilitating the organization of these services. Trained volunteers are tasked with offering these services, with the aid of paid consultants, and are assigned to the IB&D department. However, the local networks help facilitate this by organizing logistical matters of these services (e.g. scheduling). The services to individual members serve to organize the marginal members (which were often the younger generation), as claimed by De Beer (2013) but also to represent their interests. While Table 2 (p. 13) listed a number of union activities based on the work of Tros, Albeda & Derksen (2004) and their associated goals based on Freeman & Medoff (1984) and Tros et al. (2017), I found that in practice the multi-scalar operation of the union

¹⁸ The active members, or *kaderleden* ('firm stewards'), are two ways of addressing the volunteers of the FNV. Both terms can be used, but depending on whether or not their volunteering concerns itself with primarily the firm or other activities, the context decides which term will be used.

¹⁹ In addition to local networks, who can decide to develop thematic activities, there are also thematic networks. Thematic networks include members throughout the country (and are therefore not included in this research) who concern themselves with a topic of their interest, e.g. the women's network or the Rainbow network.

allows it to represent the interest of workers at various levels and serving various goals. The goals of the FNV are discussed in section 4.6 (p. 32)

4.4.3 Activities, assistance and promotion

Promotional activities of the union are part of the activities of the local networks of volunteers, albeit with occasional support of paid professionals. This includes, for example, distributing flyers at shopping centers and fairs to increase the visibility of the FNV. A secondary advantage of the increased visibility is the potential to increase membership. Activities are organized in collaboration with the sectors, for example during strikes. They support the efforts by helping strikers register or by handing out information. This is additional to the cross-sectoral activities developed by the regional teams themselves discussed in 4.1.2 (p. 22).

4.4.4 Social organization

I found the networks are tasked with social organization (see: Freeman & Medoff, 1984), to influence local and regional governments based on *“the interests of their members and potential members”*. As previously mentioned, not all areas have an equal share of active members. However, sometimes there is a (local) topic for which the FNV chooses to invest more resources: *“which is not to say that we are equally active in all municipalities. Because that is sometimes dependent on how many active firm stewards we have there at that moment. Or there must be a topic that we find very important, and that we invest on that a lot”*. This does not include the participation in regional governance structures that was discussed in section 4.2.2 (p. 25). This participation is generally tasked to the regional teams themselves, not the volunteers of the local networks.

4.4.5 Information & education

Although information and education for members of the FNV include the same topics nationwide, the local networks help support the organization of the information events in the region. The interviewees mentioned that while the themes of information are standardized, the way they are offered is adapted to the regional situation. An interviewee from region North stated that *“in principle these are standard themes where we see that one thing resonates more here than elsewhere [...] the box shovers, the big distribution centers. Those are not specifically located here in the North, those are located in Brabant, Limburg and in the Randstad. So we offer the same, but the degree of intensity depends on the region where we work”*. Another interviewee from region East added: *“...and when you organize an information event you adapt your language, or you adapt your topic”*. While information and education are a nationwide effort, I found that the local and regional organization allowed the FNV to better reflect the territorial preferences of its members, and allowed tailoring in line with the benefits of decentralization as argued by Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney (2017).

4.4.6 Regional teams

The introduction to this section (p. 29) discussed that the local networks are supervised by the regional teams, therefore these activities are linked to the regional teams. Furthermore, the regional teams develop activities independent of the local networks. These are the aforementioned regional governance structures (both concerning the regional labor market and other topics) and the development of cross-sectoral collaboration.

4.5 Resources

I found three types of resources of importance to developing the activities of the FNV in the regions: (I) (regional) capital funding, (II) influence, and (III) human capital.

4.5.1 Regional capital funding

I found that regional funds for projects and fees for seats in regional governance influence the activities as they created both mandate and opportunity to develop regional activities. This is in line with the theory on resources and activities by Penrose ((1995), cited in Ujwary-Gil, 2019, p. 47), who stated that without resources it is impossible to perform tasks. The formalization of the regional structure of the FNV is important to allow the organization to adapt to the increased availability of regional funds, which include the funds for the regional labor market through the RMTs (see: section 4.2.1, p. 24) as well as regional funding for other topics. The increased availability of regional funds aligns with trends of decentralization, something expressed by the interviewees. A participant reported that:

“What we see is that more and more becomes decentralized. What I just said that from 2013 the guaranteed jobs were decentralized, and now the Regional Mobility service that is being put in the labor market regions, I see that increasingly more is taking place in the region when it concerns employment and income. And that the labor market regions, those 35 labor market regions that were constructed in the Netherlands in 2013, that those receive increasingly more tasks. And what we also see, but that has been going on for years, is that from the national government, sometimes also European, more so-called Region Deals are closed, where actually a lot of financial resources go to, which is financed through projects.”

The financial resources for projects in the region were often mentioned throughout the interviews. As a specific example, the interviewees from regions North and Southeast mentioned the Just Transition Fund, a European project-based funding to aid in the energy transition and to help alleviate its negative effects²⁰.

4.5.2 Influence

Interviewees expressed that their claim of influence in regional governance structures depends on their representation of the workforce in the region: *“Yes, but you have to have enough members to be able to take a seat at certain tables, and to be heard at certain tables. Look, if I go there and I don’t have a membership base, who am I representing? [...] when I have a sufficient membership base, and I hear what they are saying, and I can organize what they need, then I managed it well”*. The degree of representation of the workforce resulted in increased influence in the region which supports the claim of Tros, Albeda & Derksen (2004). They identify that the degree of union density influences the power of the union. The interviews illustrate this notion of power should be extended beyond the union efforts related to collective action, to include influence in governance.

4.5.3 Human capital

As discussed in section 4.4 (p. 29), how the number of active members in an area affects the degree of activities the area can develop. However, on the part of the regional teams, various persons cite a lack of resources in terms of employees as a reason not to take part in regional governance structures, since there are many and the regional teams generally operate with a small number of employees (< 10 people).

²⁰ See: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund_en

4.6 Goals

This section explores the three main goals of unions as described by Freeman & Medoff (1984). These are social organization, efficiency and distribution of income. Each section discusses to what extent the regional activities of the FNV relate to the respective goals.

4.6.1 Social organization: membership, representation and influence.

The previous sections discussed the relation between membership and whether the membership base in a region represents the workforce. When there is a discrepancy this decreases the influence of the union within the regional governance. The participation of the union in (regional) governance structures was categorized in Table 2 (p. 13) to fit with social organization following the work of Freeman & Medoff (1984). The interviewees were also in agreement that the regional scale can increase visibility compared to the national and sectoral structure, and that this can aid in attracting new members. This was stated in the respective policy documents (FNV, 2022a; FNV, 2022b), where the increased visibility is a goal of the regional organization of the FNV, for example through the development of the 35 local union houses. The increased opportunity to partake in social organization in the region allows them to benefit from the decentralization of labor organization. The role of the union in the *Gasberaad*²¹ in Groningen, for example, shows the value of democratic accountability on a smaller scale as described by Pike, Rodríguez-Pose, & Tomaney (2017). It highlights the potential of the union as a partner in governance. This also resulted in an increased shift towards social organization.

4.6.2 Efficiency: comprehensive wellbeing

The regional activities of the union are part of a strategy to gain bigger influence in the regional labor market structure. In addition, interviewees described that their influence in the region allows them to better argue for comprehensive wellbeing, which has become a prominent goal of their department. However, this is a recent development. This was argued to have originated with the regionalization of the labor market in 2013. The labor market structure was originally organized to become more inclusive to those who struggled to find employment through *garantiebanen*. Increasingly, this included other parties, such as educational institutions, and the FNV found their position there as well: *“it quickly became broader, that the labor market region was not only garantiebanen [...] And then it was also about ‘live long development’, it was about tackling youth unemployment. And our people in those boards, those bring the FNV-agenda.”* This is aimed to create a more efficient labor market which fits is part of the efficiency goals described by Freeman & Medoff (1984), which include a more efficient labor market but also work place practices and general social efficiency.

Regarding the various forms of efficiency, interviews expressed that the core activity of the union remains to develop employability in the region, that is in line with their values of ‘good work.’ However their strategy also aims to improve the region in a broader sense, to benefit comprehensive wellbeing²² in the region, in addition to economic wellbeing. In the more rural regions interviewees mentioned the goal of keeping the region attractive to live and thereby improving and maintaining the labor supply in

²¹ The *Gasberaad* is a collective of social partners and organizations aimed to steer the process of reconstruction and reimbursement after the earthquakes in Groningen by involving organizations and citizens to relieve them during the process while ensuring the unique character and identity of the Groninger region. See: <https://www.gasberaad.nl/groninger-gasberaad/>.

²² Comprehensive wellbeing is here used as the translation for the Dutch phrase *‘brede welvaart’*.

the region. The wide range of regional governance topics was discussed with an interviewee from region East: *“And for example also about good living, that it is affordable, with tax allowances, energy allowances, those kinds of things. But for example also in the SER of Overijssel, that we talk about a livable environment. Because we say, then you are also talking about living, and if you don’t have a good living environment, then people, young people, won’t go live in the region. So there has to be a good culture policy, then there has to also be, yes, a nice environment, that makes people say, here I want to live, here I want to work”*. A similar sentiment on the importance of the livability of the rural areas was expressed by region North: *“Employment and income, living, working, life in the region. That is what we connected to”*. As to why this focus shifted to expand beyond work and income, an interviewee in region Northeast addressed the new character of employment and the solidarity principles of the FNV:

“The employee of the future is not like forty or fifty years ago only focused on its job, it is also about your own development, it is also about that you have your friends, and your family outside of your work [...] We do it because it is our concern that it is a good society. Good society, that there is no poverty, that there is equality, you know. Those are our values which we find important to carry those out”.

The primary purpose of the FNV is still to improve the condition of work and workers. However, the shift in focus to the larger comprehensive wellbeing of workers, rather than pure economic wellbeing, shows the union moves beyond distributive goals towards more efficiency goals as described in section 2.2.2 (p. 11) of this paper and include the general social efficiency of the region. This is, however, not independent from social organization as described in section 4.6.1. Furthermore, social organization arguably, to some extent, serves the efficiency goals of the union through the relationship between membership and influence.

4.6.3 Distribution of income

The final goal of the union, as described by Freeman & Medoff (1984), is the distribution of income, primarily aimed at the equality of wages. The FNV does develop activities to this purpose, but these do not concentrate in the regional arena. However, the FNV does attempt to localize larger issues, particularly the notion of unlivable wages. For example, they address this in campaigns, but this appears as a multi-scalar effort which will be discussed in section 4.7.1 section (p. 34).

One of the participants described an aspirational idea of a regional collective bargaining agreement, rather than sectoral. However, they expressed that the difficulty with that sort of regional distributive goal (although it should also include topics such as employability and education) is that within the region there is a variety of partners (large environmental complexity) whereas in sectoral or firm level collective bargaining negotiations there are only those representing employers and employees. This shows why the region is a difficult scale to affect distribution of income.

4.7 Geographical scale

As explained in section 2.4 (p. 15), I suspected the multi-scalar structure of labor regulation affects the design of regional activities of the FNV. The interplay between the regional scale and other levels of labor regulation and governance is discussed in this sub section, as well as the influence of regional context and identity. Finally, this section concludes with a discussion of advantages and disadvantages of the regional scale.

4.7.1 Multi-scalar

Section 4.6.3 (p. 33) discussed how the local or regional scale can be utilized to highlight the effect of national issues on individuals. An interviewee stated that: *“What we see is the power of local or of the individual, that gives it a face. A union member has a problem and all of a sudden it becomes ‘Herman, works at the bank, and can’t pay his bills anymore’”*. I found the multi-scalar approach of the FNV is woven into their notion of representing the members interests. One interviewee explained how this was done on the individual level, with tax and legal services, on the sectoral level through collective bargaining agreements, and on the regional level with the regional labor market. This is a tiered system where members’ interests are represented on various levels. This further shows that, while there is a division between individual and collective efforts, there is no equally clear separation between activities that serve to represent interests of members, or activities aimed at organizing or governance.

Furthermore, the increased local and regional presence of the union does not only increase the visibility of the centralized power to its members and potential members, but also of the members to more centralized power structures. Interviews were conducted around the same time as the Provincial elections in the Netherlands. Therefore, the power of the provincial government was often discussed throughout the interviews. One of the activities of the regional teams was to inform people of the importance and contents of the elections, as well as the positions of various parties on topics that concern the ideals of FNV.

4.7.2 Regional context

While the policy documents of the FNV mostly develop its regional strategy to serve the (changing) regional labor market, the interviews show there is a more holistic strategy for developing the comprehensive wellbeing in the region. The execution of this, however, is shaped by a high degree of freedom on the part of the regional teams to fit the regional context. The flexibility to adjust to the regional context (*‘couleur locale’* as it is called by some) was explained by interviewees as one of the advantages of the regional organization. The regional context, as well as path-dependency, influences the position of the FNV in regional governance structures. For example, the region Southeast remains active in the Economic Board South Limburg as it has been for a long time, whereas the region Northwest does not take part in the Economic Board in the region. This is also shown by the fact that the regions North, East and Southwest take part in the SER North-Netherlands, SER Overijssel and SER Brabant, respectively, but the other regions do not have a regional SER. The region North takes part in the *Gasberaad*, an organization set up to help alleviate the damages from the Groninger earthquakes due to gas extraction. These earthquakes resulted in large amounts of material and immaterial damages in the region. This damage and the subsequent processes are region specific and were said in interviews to not compare to other regions, except perhaps the closing of the mines in Limburg in the 1960s-1970s. The importance of the consequences of the gas extraction in the region was raised by persons in the regions North, Center and Southeast. This indicates that this regional issue holds significant importance to the (regional) FNV despite being an isolated issue.

4.7.3 The regional identity

In some of the regions there is a clear link between the regional organization of the union and the regional context. In others, it is more of a layer of organization and coordination within the FNV. This depends on the strength of a regional identity. This is stronger in regions further from the Randstad (North and Southeast particularly). The regional leader in Southeast said *“we have, just like Groningen for example, a real provincial profile. A regional profile. The further you are away from the Randstad, the more you ‘team’”*. An interviewee from the region Center raised the rural/urban divide in the Netherlands, as the Randstad is the focal point for many activities of the FNV in the Netherlands: *“Labor*

Day, where does that take place? Amsterdam, Utrecht, the Hague- And yes, that is far away from the people in Groningen, Achterhoek, Limburg, you name it". A similar sentiment was expressed by the team leader from region North: "We want to fight for the good cause and we want to fight here for the good cause. What we don't want is being shoved into a bus to Utrecht all the time". In region Southeast it was said that "well yes, you have to be careful not to become a Randstad-union". This shows that within the union there exists a rural/urban divide. A formalization of regional activities might help to bridge that divide by allowing the development of more activity within the home region. A participant also commented that in the case of a more centralized or sectoral organization structure, as well as in the case of downsizing, the chances are higher that more union employment is concentrated at the FNV headquarters in the Randstad.

In contrast to regions North and Southeast, region Center experienced that their region is a rather artificial construct. It covers the more service sector-oriented province of Utrecht, as well as Flevoland, which employs a large number of people in the agricultural sector *"But Center, what characterizes Center? [...] If you look at Flevoland, that is more agricultural, with some large agglomerations. If you look at Utrecht, the service industry is more important there [...] So you have a region Center, but also Center is actually- Flevoland and Utrecht can't be compared in that sense".* Additionally, region Northwest experienced that their regional issues are often already part of the national agenda of the FNV, as their region was the center of large-scale economic activities of national interest. For example, in the case of Schiphol, this takes away the opportunities to profile themselves on regional issues.

4.7.4 Other advantages and disadvantages

Alongside earlier mentioned benefits and disadvantages of regional organization, some notable disadvantages that were named were inefficiency and administrative costs. For example, someone from region East reported: *"Sometimes in the region something is done, just with local employers who don't know the agreements [on the national level] and are then reinventing the wheel again".* Another interviewee stated that the regional organization is bound to national rules. For example, ordering meals for a meeting has to be done from a central organization, rather than a local entrepreneur. Two separate interviewees (North and Southeast) expressed that it was sometimes unfortunate that there was no central team within the organization that helped them gain (regional) funds, such as funds from the European Union. This is a time-consuming process and it would be more efficient to do this through one specialized (central) team. Another interviewee stated the increased cost of operating various regional teams: *"Because that is six team leaders, six managers, six consultants, something like that. While if you organize it on a national level, you could do, well let's say, with two team leaders and three managers, you know and then you can use your time more effectively, but then again..."*. However, the interviewees consider the (potential) advantages of the regional scale to outweigh the disadvantages. The primary reason mentioned was the close proximity to the people. This resulted in a lower threshold to reach out to them and for them to reach out to the organization. However, this reduces organizational time lag and increases strength of the organization as well: *"by optimizing regional strength, color and issues you can operate faster and gain position".* Thereby, the regional organization of the FNV is considered valuable to its operations.

Conclusion

5.1 Answering the research question and sub questions

The main research question of this thesis was:

Considering the multi-scalar system of labor organization and regulation in the Netherlands, how does the regional scale influence the operations and organization of the FNV?

This question was answered through the three sub questions, which will be answered first and thereafter answer the main research question.

With regards to the first sub question: *is there a regional component in the organization of the FNV, and if so why?*

In short: yes. While the (democratic) association FNV is organized primarily along the sectoral structure, the 'work organization' within the FNV is organized in six regions. Each region has a team and team leader tasked with organizing and supervising 'collective' efforts. They employ staff and operate from regional offices. The embedment of the regional activities on the part of the collective efforts of the FNV, making them colleagues of the employees in the sectors rather than a stand-alone entity, is beneficial to the unions aim for the regions to develop cross-sectoral collaboration on local and regional issues.

In addition, the regional teams and their efforts serve to increase visibility amongst (potential) members. This targets particularly those that resonate less with traditional union activities and its brand, considering recent decline in membership and the aging of the membership base. The regional organization of the FNV is supported by the available funding for regional projects and governance, which allows the organization to increase comprehensive wellbeing in the region.

The second sub question was: *are there differences in regional organization and operations within the FNV, and if so how can these be explained?*

Yes, there are differences. While the services to (individual) members are the same nationwide, the regional execution allows for adaptation to the local context. In regard to the regional governance activities of the FNV, these are also informed by the regional context and path dependency in the region. This led to regional differentiation both in its goals as well as its execution. Additionally, the existence of a regional identity aids the development of activities in the region. In the more rural regions this can make the union more attractive, as it can counteract the centralization of (national) FNV activities in the Randstad.

Furthermore, the regional activities are influenced by resources, primarily through the availability of funds for the RMTs. These allow the union to grow their organization in the regional labor market infrastructure. Moreover, the funds for regional projects, such as the Just Transition Fund, but also regional governance influence regional activities. Finally, the regional membership density is a resource through its effect on influence of the FNV in regional governance.

The final sub question asked: *how do changes in (regional) labor and (regional) labor organization in the Netherlands affect the FNV?*

The FNV increased the regional organization of their work organization after the reorganization of 2015, and is currently doing so again. These developments serve to optimize their organization considering the decentralization of the labor market that started with the *Sociaal Akkoord* of 2013. This increased with the implementation of the Regional Mobility Teams during the COVID-19 pandemic and instigated the current (re)development of the regional labor market infrastructure.

However, the decentralization of the labor market has created a fragmented regional governance landscape. As a result of this fragmentation, the representation of the workforce is increasingly important in order to fight for influence in various governance bodies. Yet the limited number of employees (human capital) causes the teams to carefully consider which governance activities further their goals in that specific region. Additionally, the regional organization creates opportunity for the FNV to increase its proximity and visibility to its members and potential members. This is important to attract new members in light of declining membership numbers and to remain agile in changing labor markets. This is also the result of the relationship between membership and influence. Regional membership was found to be influenced by sectoral structure and business organization, socio-historical tradition, and as the result of 'contemporary' collectivity in the region.

To conclude, the main question of this research was: *considering the multi-scalar system of labor organization and regulation in the Netherlands, how does the regional scale influence the operations and organization of the FNV?*

The interviews showed that the regional scale allows the union to better adapt to the multi-scalar labor organization in the Netherlands (particularly to adjust to decentralization and the availability of regional funds) and to operate outside the sectoral boundaries of its organization structure. The regional scale allows the FNV to position themselves in closer proximity to workers. This allows it to better represent their interests on various levels and governance structures, also as a result of tailoring to the regional context and identity, as well as to increase visibility to (potential) members which affects its (regional) influence. The environmental complexity and variability that takes place in the region and the country allows the union to expand its social organization to increase the comprehensive, rather than purely economic, wellbeing of its members and potential members.

5.2 Limitations of the research

The participants of this research all saw advantages to regional organization of the FNV. However, their perspective might be biased as they operate on the regional scale. It could be that persons from different layers within the organization view this differently. Furthermore, the scope and resources of this research only allowed for 7 interviewees. While the length and depth of the interviews resulted in a considerable degree of information saturation, this could affect the number of perspectives that are included in this study. Similarly, it was unfortunately not possible to speak to someone from region Southwest, which includes the urban agglomerations of Rotterdam and the Hague, nor the more peripheral province Zeeland. Their experience could be similar to that of region Center, as this is an urban-rural constructed region. However, this cannot be claimed with certainty.

5.3 Recommendations for further research

While this thesis operates on an intersection of economic geography and organizational theory, further research could be done into the organizational structure of the FNV. For example, actor-network analysis would be valuable. Research into what informed the formation of existing networks and how they are linked, could prove to be interesting. Additionally, the topic of this research was an assessment of strategy rather than effectiveness of its operations. This could be the topic of additional research. To further understand the influence of the socio-historic context on union membership, the Northern provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe could provide an interesting case study as it was acknowledged there remains a cultural tradition of union membership in this region.

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Appendix A.1: Union density across provinces

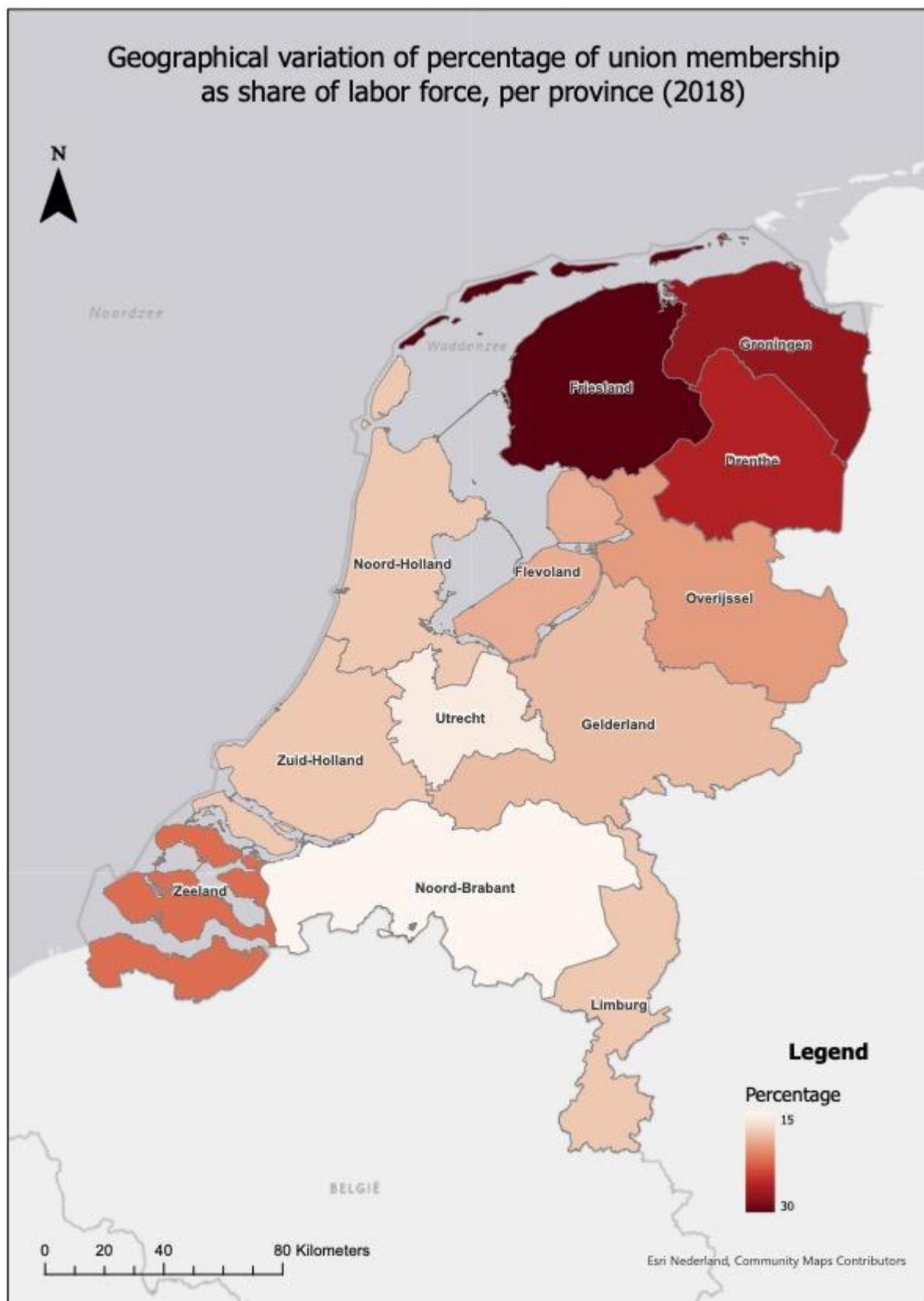


Figure 3: Geographical variation in number of union memberships as a share of the labor force across provinces, 2018 (created by author, data from: CBS (2019)).

Appendix A.2: Union density across COROP areas

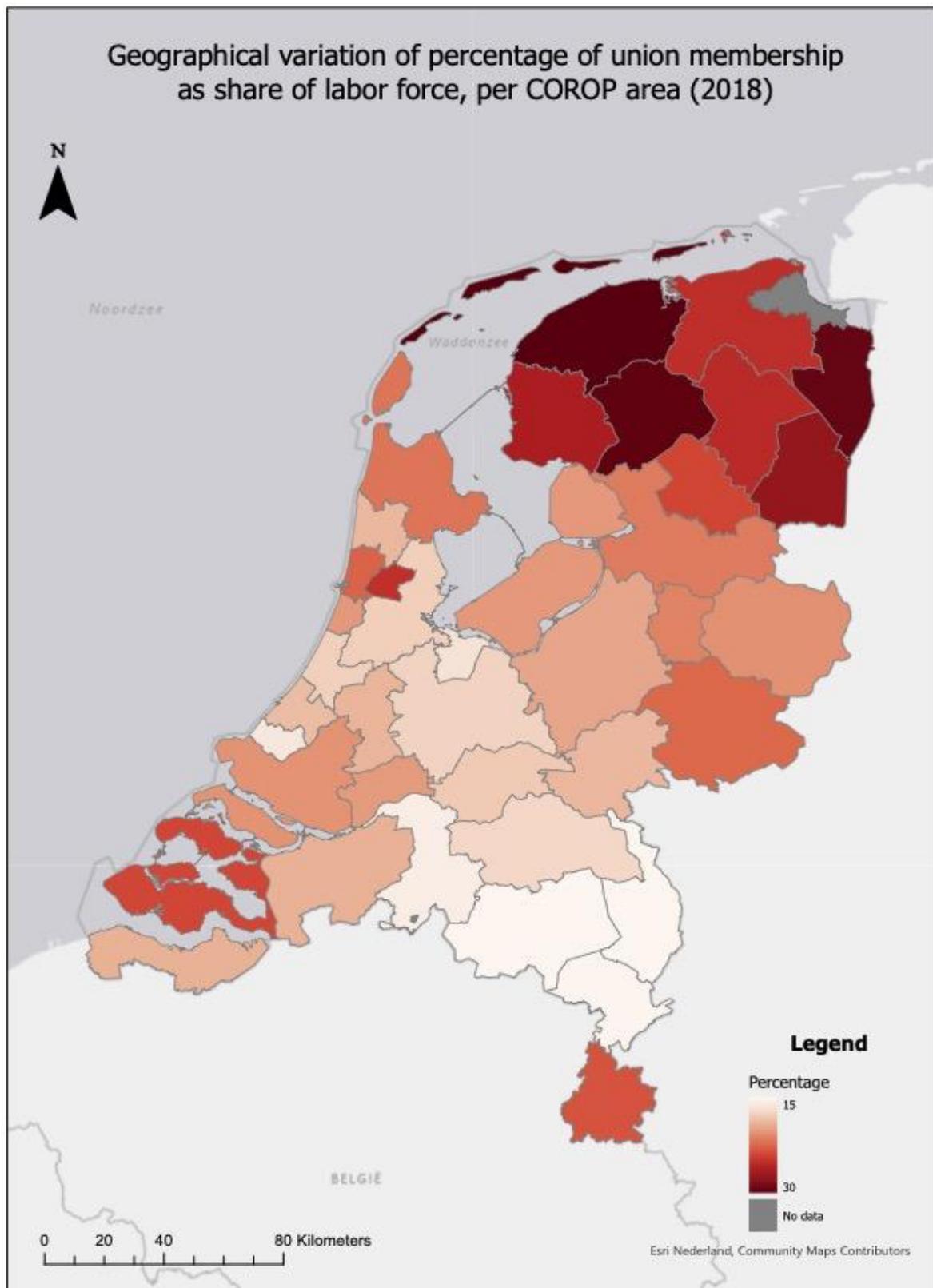


Figure 4: Geographical variation in number of union memberships as a share of the labor force across COROP areas, 2018 (created by author, data from: CBS (2019)).

Appendix B.1: Interview guide (English)

Short introduction of the researcher and the research

Introduction of the participant

- Position within the FNV, short description of prior career

Description of the research

- This research aims to explore what the influence is of the regional scale on the operations and organization of the FNV. You work within the FNV to some extent with the organization on a regional level. Can you shortly explain what tasks this includes.
- Can you briefly explain how the regional scale is relevant within your work in the FNV

Explanation of the influence of regional characteristics

- The literature has shown that there is regional variation in the membership of trade unions and that the regional context is important in this, but it is unknown how exactly. What does the membership base look like in your region, both in terms of coverage and member characteristics. Do you think this differs from the situation in other regions? What do you think explains these differences?

(Regional) labor union activities

- From the literature I found 4 main themes of trade union activities: representation of members, influence in external administrative bodies, information and education and (attracting members through) individual services.
- Let's start with the administrative representation. In which organs? What goals are envisaged?
- Representation of the members. How and where is that done? What are the main objectives?
- Information and education: to whom? By who? Which topics?
- Individual services. What kind of services and does that help attract members?
- What are (briefly) the advantages and disadvantages of regional organization of activities.
- What resources does the FNV have at its disposal and where do they come from? Is scale relevant here?

Trends and transitions

- Which trends or transitions are current in your region? For example in the field of the labor market, political development at national/local/regional level or the membership file of the FNV?
- Does this affect the activities of the FNV, which activities are linked to this?
- Can the organization move along with these transitions, and what does that look like?

Organization structure

- How does the region collaborate with other layers of the organization or beyond? Who are possible partners inside and outside the organization for you?
- As far as I know, the FNV is organized strongly sectoral, is that indeed the case and how does that affect how the organization operates?
- Is there an informal organizational structure within the FNV in addition to the formal organizational structure?

Appendix B.2: Interview guide (Dutch)

Korte introductie van de onderzoeker en het onderzoek

Introductie van de deelnemer

- Rol binnen de organisatie, beknopte omschrijving van carrière.

Beschrijving van het onderzoek

- Dit onderzoek probeert te ontdekken wat de invloed is van de regionale schaal op de werkzaamheden en organisatie van de FNV. U bent binnen de FNV in bepaalde mate bezig met de organisatie op regionaal niveau. Kunt u kort uitleggen welke werkzaamheden u uitvoert?
- Kunt u kort uitleggen hoe de regio relevant is in uw werk binnen de FNV?

Uiteenzetting van de invloed van regionale kenmerken

- Uit de literatuur is gebleken dat er regionale variatie is in het lidmaatschapsbestand van vakbonden en dat de regionale context hier belangrijk is maar onbekend hoe precies. Hoe ziet het lidmaatschapsbestand eruit in uw regio, zowel qua dekkingsgraad als kenmerken van leden. Verschilt dit naar uw idee van de situatie in andere regio's? Wat verklaart naar uw idee deze verschillen?

(Regionale) vakbondsactiviteiten

- Uit de literatuur vond ik 4 voornaamste thema's van vakbondsactiviteiten: vertegenwoordiging van leden, invloed in externe bestuurlijke organen, informatie en voorlichting en (aantrekken van leden door) individuele dienstverlening.
- Laten we beginnen bij de bestuurlijke vertegenwoordiging. In welke organen? Welke doelen worden beoogd?
- Vertegenwoordiging van de leden. Hoe en waar wordt dat gedaan? Wat zijn de belangrijkste doelstellingen?
- Informatie en voorlichting: aan wie? Door wie? Welke onderwerpen?
- Individuele dienstverlening. Wat voor diensten en helpt dat met het aantrekken van leden?
- Wat zijn (beknopt) de voor en nadelen van regionale organisatie van activiteiten.
- Welke middelen heeft de FNV tot zijn beschikking en waar komen die vandaan? Is schaal hier relevant?

Trends en transities

- Welke trends of transities zijn actueel in uw regio? Bijvoorbeeld op het gebied van de arbeidsmarkt, politieke ontwikkeling op landelijk/lokaal/regionaal niveau of het lidmaatschapsbestand van de FNV?
- Heeft dit invloed op de activiteiten van de FNV, welke activiteiten zijn hieraan gekoppeld?
- Kan de organisatie meebewegen met deze transities, en hoe ziet dat eruit?

Organisatiestructuur

- Hoe wordt er vanuit de regio samengewerkt met andere lagen van de organisatie of daarbuiten? Wie zijn eventuele partners binnen en buiten de organisatie voor u?
- Voor zover mij bekend is de FNV sterk sectoraal georganiseerd, is dat inderdaad zo en hoe heeft dat invloed op hoe de organisatie opereert?
- Bestaat de naast de formele organisatiestructuur ook een informele organisatiestructuur binnen de FNV?

Appendix C: Coding scheme

Table 3: Coding scheme (source: created by author)

Goals	Activities	Transitions/trends	Scale	Organization
Distributive	Representation of workers	Individualization and flexibilization of work	Macro	Degree of fit
Productive	Governance	Decentralization	Meso (region)	Environmental variability
Efficiency	Information & education	Effects of (declining) membership numbers	Meso (branch/secto)	Environmental complexity
Distribution of income/corrective	Services to individual members	<i>Digitalization</i>	Micro	Core structure (formal)
Social organization		<i>Comprehensive wellbeing</i>	<i>Multi-scalar</i>	Core structure (informal)
Organization (goal)		<i>Aging population</i>		<i>Organizational resources</i>
		<i>Collectivity</i>		
		<i>Energy transition/energy poverty</i>		
		<i>Austerity/unlivable wages</i>		
		<i>COVID-19</i>		

Table 4: Coding scheme (continued) (source: created by author).

Advantages of decentralization	Disadvantages of decentralization	<i>Regional governance</i>
(Historical) regional context/regional identity	(Administrative) cost	<i>fragmentation</i>
Tailoring	Lack of economies of scale in policy	<i>Couleur locale</i>
Coordination		<i>Battle for influence</i>
Accountability	Negative spillover effects	<i>Labor market</i>
Innovation		<i>Differentiation in governance</i>
Efficiency		<i>Regional funds</i>
<i>Visibility</i>		

Codes in plain text are deductive codes, codes in italics are deductive codes.

Appendix D.1 Organizational chart of the FNV association

FNV VERENIGINGSSTRUCTUUR

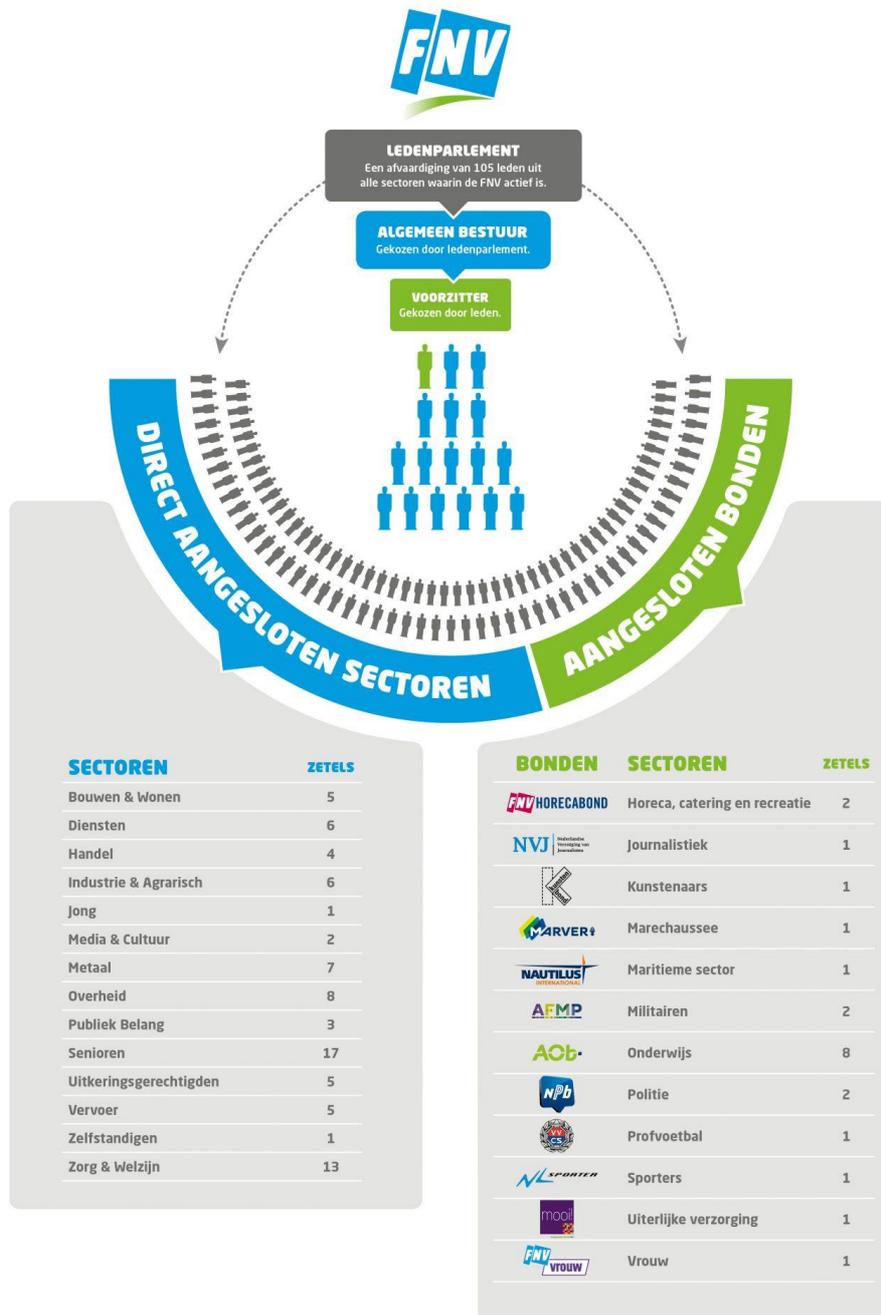


Figure 5: Association structure of the FNV (source: <https://www.fnvwerkt.nl/handboek-consulenten-en-trainers-loopbaanadvies-fnv/organogram/>).

The text in this image reads in the top middle that there is a member parliament, from which a general board is selected, from which a chairperson is selected. On the bottom left it reads which sectors are directly represented, and the number of seats. The bottom right shows the (sectoral) unions that hold seat in the FNV.

Appendix D.2 Organizational chart for the regional office in Groningen

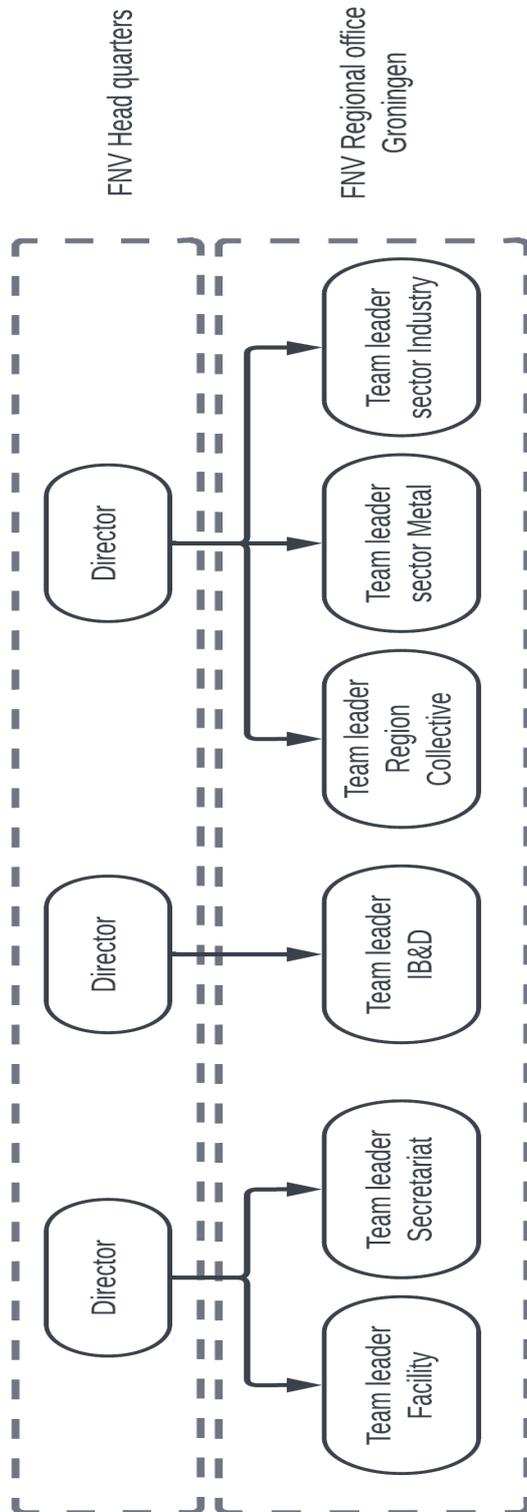


Figure 6: Simplified organizational chart for the regional office of Groningen, region North (source: created by author).

This image presents a much-simplified visualization of the hierarchic structure that followed from the interviews with participants of the regional office in Groningen, region North. Other participants commented a similar structure applies to other regions.

Naturally, the team leaders supervise teams. For clarity these are not pictured.