10 Social and economic environment

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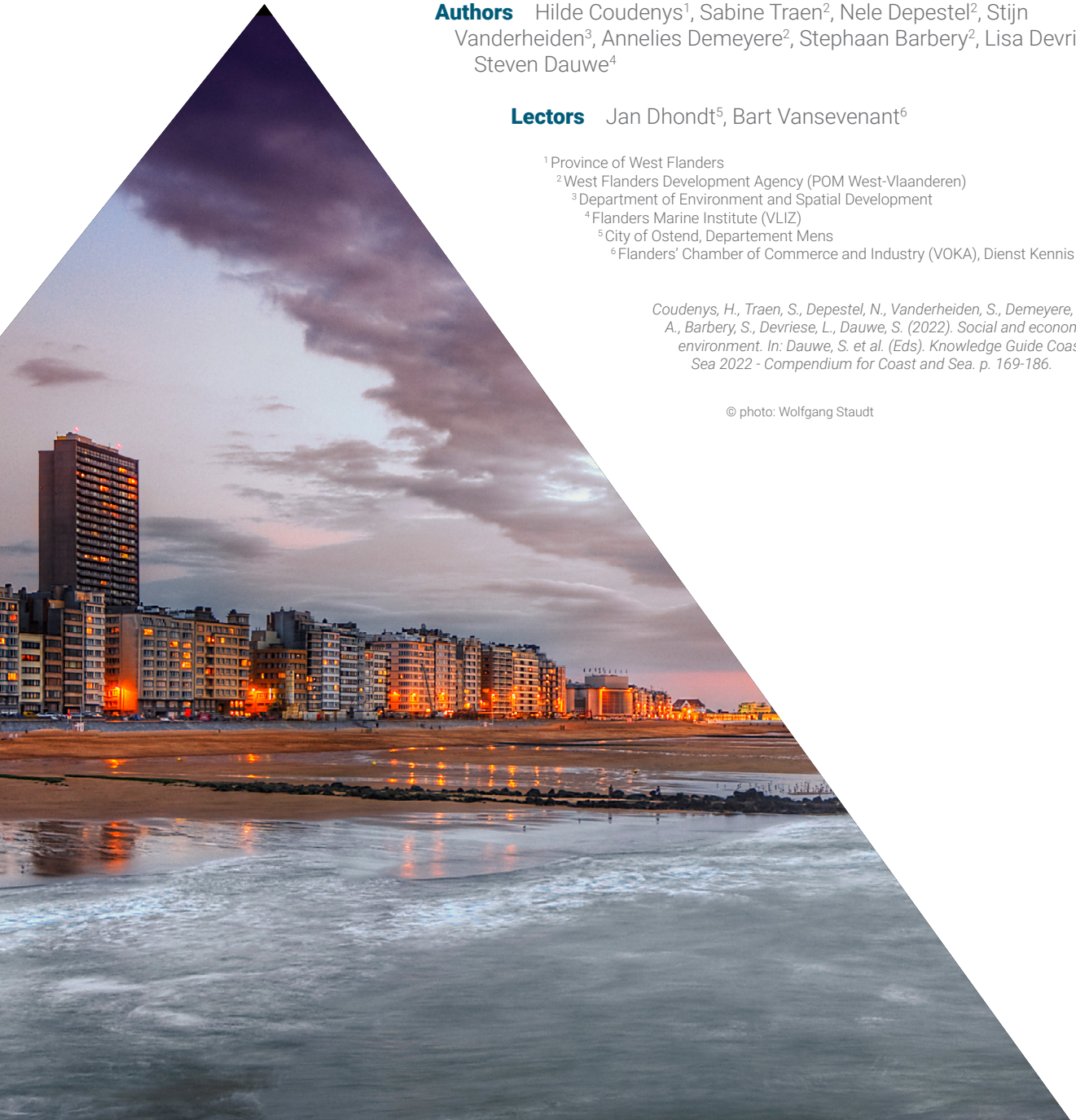

Coastal zones are often areas with their own identity and specific challenges. These heterogeneous regions show, certainly in socio-economic terms, clear differences between their coastal municipalities and its hinterland (The changing faces of Europe's coastal zones, EEA 2006, Balancing the future of Europe's coasts, EEA 2013). This is also the case along the Belgian coast, where the neighbourhoods located by the sea are clearly distinguished from those located further inland. In many cases, the seafront neighbourhoods exhibit more metropolitan characteristics such as high population densities, an increased risk of deprivation, loneliness, limited facilities for less mobile people, pressure on the housing market, more people living alone, etc.

The Belgian coast is characterised by an atypical social environment with a relatively old population and a high number of second-residences (Westtoer 2016, Stedelijk systeem kust 2017, Dauwe et al. 2019). The Belgian coast is also very distinctive from an economic perspective, with on the one hand, the presence of large economic gateways (two seaports, an international airport) and a diverse network of economic activities linked to coastal tourism and the Blue Economy. On the other hand, there's also increased unemployment, more seasonal employment and few quality jobs for the higher-educated (Breyne et al. 2007, Maelfait et al. 2012, Dauwe et al. 2019, West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020).

In this thematic chapter, the Belgian coastal zone[1] is primarily compared to the province of West Flanders. However, it is possible to benchmark these figures within larger geographical areas (e.g. the Flemish Region) when consulting the publications or websites cited within this thematic chapter.

10.1 Policy context

In Belgium, policy on the socio-economic environment involves both federal and Flemish actors. At the federal level, there are the federal public services: FPS Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, FPS Economy, SMEs, Self-employed and Energy and the federal public planning service for social integration (PPS SI). At the Flemish level, there are the policy areas Work and Social Economy and Economy, Science and Innovation (see also the Flemish policy papers Work and Social Economy 2019-2024 and Economy, Science policy and Innovation 2019-2024).

Housing policy and spatial planning are governed by the Flemish Department of Environment and Spatial Development (OMG) (see the Flemish policy papers Environment 2019-2024 and Living 2019-2024). OMG runs, in cooperation with the Province of West Flanders, a territorial development program (*territoriaal ontwikkelingsprogramma*) for the coastal zone (T.OP Coastal Zone) (*T.OP Kustzone*). The program works by an action-oriented programme for the spatial development of this area in the short and medium term and is centered around themes such as the 'urbanised coastal zone', 'polder space' and 'land-sea interactions'. The T.OP Coastal Zone programme is based on the revised Provincial Spatial Structure Plan (PRS W-VL), local partner consultations and studies such as CcASPAR, MKL2100, Codex Coastal Zone, STADSMonitor, etc. (see also in more detail in **10.4.3 Urban vision development on the coast**). Other Flemish policy areas such as Welfare, Public Health and Family (WVG), Education and Training (OV), Culture, Youth, Sport and Media (CJSM), and Mobility and Public Works (MOW) also play an important role in the social and/or economic environment of the coastal zone.

The Province of West Flanders (e.g. Streekhuis Kust) and the municipalities are important in the implementation of economic and housing policy and spatial planning (see below and thematic chapter **Tourism and recreation**). The legal framework for spatial planning can be found in the Codex Coastal Zone, theme Spatial planning. The local legislation for coastal residents is also listed in the Codex Coastal Zone, within the theme Local legislation.

10.2 Spatial use

The total area of the coastal zone amounts to 1,183 km². The coastal municipalities constitute 42% of this area, the hinterland municipalities take up 58% (Land use according to the *Kadasterregister* - Statbel).

The current spatial use is determined by the regional plans drafted by the federal government in the 70s and 80s. A regional spatial plan (*gewestplan*) corresponded roughly to one or more districts, in which space was arranged into areas where housing and facilities could further expand, where business activities could be accommodated, where camping sites were provided in recreational areas, where natural areas were protected and where there's

[1]The coastal zone comprises the ten coastal municipalities (Blankenberge, Bruges, Knokke-Heist, Bredene, De Haan, Middelkerke, Ostend, De Panne, Koksijde and Nieuwpoort) and the nine hinterland municipalities (Damme, Jabbeke, Zuienkerke, Diksmuide, Lo-Reninge, Gistel, Oudenburg, Alveringem and Veurne).

room for agriculture. An area on a regional spatial plan could be further refined by the municipality in special urban plans (BPAs). This was especially the case for buildable areas. As a result, differences remain between the coastal municipalities in terms of, for example, height and density of appartments.

The spatial planning system changed with the new Flemish Decree on the organisation of spatial planning (Decree of 18 May 1999). The destinations in a regional spatial plan remained valid until they are replaced by a new destination through a spatial implementation plan (SIP). Such SIPs can be drafted by municipalities, provinces or the Flemish Region. The establishment of a SIP corresponds with the implementation of a spatial vision, described in a spatial structure plan. There are three spatial structure plans: the Flemish Spatial Structure Plan (RSV), the West Flanders Spatial Structure Plan (PRS W-VL) and the municipal structural plans. These spatial visions determine the future spatial use. The Regional Plans, SIPs and BPAs can be consulted on the following website.

The RSV identifies the coast as both an urban- and a tourist-recreational network. This means that a coherent urban policy for the coast should be pursued, with opportunities for further development of tourist-recreational activities (both for day tourism and residential tourism) and qualitative residential environments. This grants the regional urban area of Ostend (comprising parts of Middelkerke, Ostend, Bredene and Oudenburg) the role of accommodating emerging needs for housing and business activities. Additionally, Ostend and Zeebrugge are designated as economic gateways, providing the two seaports, as well as the International Airport Ostend-Bruges, with further opportunities for development. The development of these gateways is defined in regional spatial implementation plans (RSIPs). The Flemish Region also anchors large continuous nature areas such as the *Zwin*, the beaches between seaside neighbourhoods on the west coast, etc. within these RSIPs. Parallel to the further implementation of the RSV, the Government of Flanders approved the White Paper 'Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen' 2017' on 30 November 2016. In this White Paper, the Government of Flanders formulates objectives, spatial development principles and activities that will act as a basis for the transformation of Flanders' space. Subsequently, on 20 July 2018, the Government of Flanders approved the Strategische visie Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen 2018, in which strategic objectives are outlined for the coming Flanders' Spatial Policy Plan (*Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen* (BRV). A draft BRV is currently being prepared which, after approval, will be subjected to a public consultation. The intention is for provinces and municipalities to also come up with a new spatial policy plan to replace the current structure plans (a preliminary draft for the province of West Flanders is expected in early 2022). Specifically, for the coast and the *Westhoek*, a supra-local strategic vision has already been developed in which the spatial development of the region is optimally attuned to mobility and public transport (Vandekerckhove et al. 2019). A Territorial Development Programme (T.OP Kustzone) was also developed within this renewed spatial development policy for the coastal zone (see **10.1 Policy context** and **10.4.3 Urban vision development on the coast**).

The PRS W-VL refines the coastal planning space, giving each coastal municipality opportunities for further development. This is further detailed in municipal structural plans and converted into municipal spatial implementation plans. The province determines the possibilities regarding constructions on the beach or dyke by means of provincial spatial implementation plans (PSIPs). The PRS W-VL and the PSIPs are available at www.west-vlaanderen.be/ruimtelijke-planning.

10.3 Current state

10.3.1 Social environment

10.3.1.1 The coast and its inhabitants

On 1 January 2020, the coastal zone counted 426,075 inhabitants (coastal municipalities: 339,501; 79.7%; hinterland municipalities: 86,574; 20.3%). This is 35.4% of the total population of West Flanders (Rijksregister, processed by the Data and Analysis service of the West Flanders Development Agency (D&A) | provincies.incijfers.be). About 14.4% of the population in the coastal zone has foreign roots. In the coastal municipalities this is 16.1% against 7.5% of the inhabitants of the hinterland municipalities (Rijksregister, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

Between 2010-2020 the population of the coastal zone has increased with 2.7% (figure 1), and at a similar rate in the coastal and hinterland municipalities. The increase in the coastal zone is slightly below the population increase in the province of West Flanders (+3.5%). Projections by Statistiek Vlaanderen suggest that the population in the coastal zone will increase by more than 5% by 2035. The expected population growth in the coastal zone (and by extension for the whole of West Flanders) is less than the expected population growth in Flanders in general (+7.6%).

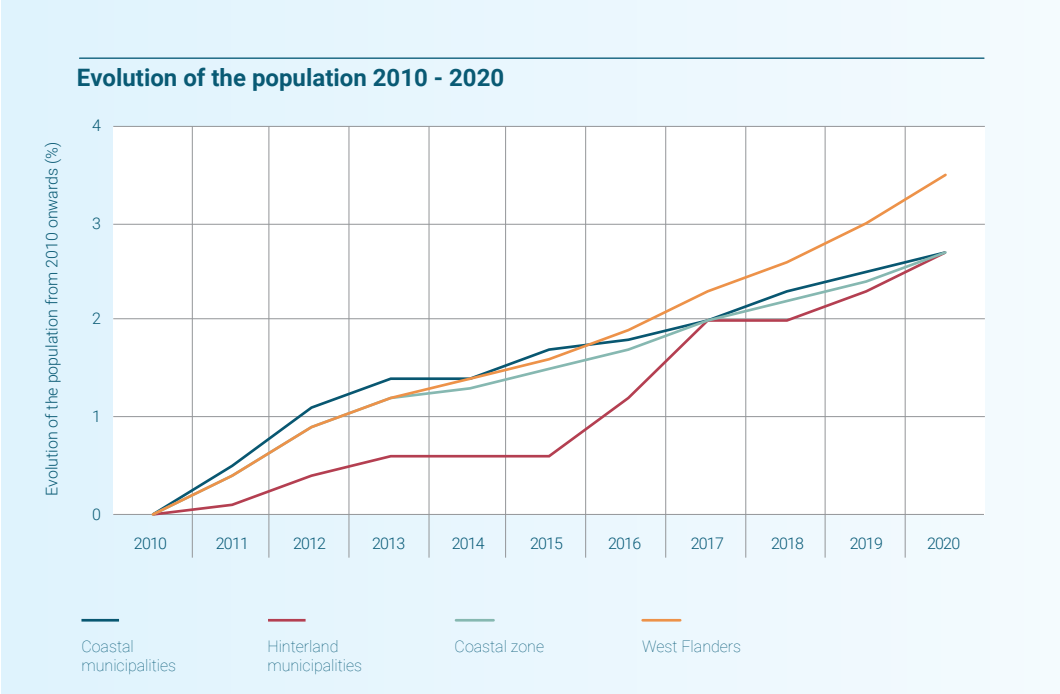

Figure 1. The relative evolution of the population in the coastal zone and the province of West Flanders between 2010-2020 (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

The Belgian coast, combined with the Dutch and parts of the northern French coast, constitutes one of the coastal regions along the North Sea with the highest population density. Regions with over 1,000 inhabitants per km² are recorded in the coastal zone of the Netherlands and Belgium (North Sea Region Climate Change Assessment 2016). The average population density in the Flemish coastal zone is 374 inhabitants per km², although this is strongly demarcated geographically. The average population in coastal municipalities is 708 inhabitants per km², whereas on average 131 inhabitants per km² live in hinterland municipalities. The population density can be even higher, regularly exceeding 1,000 inhabitants per km², when closer to the coast (figure 2) (Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be, Coastal Portal). These strong regional differences exert an impact on major social and economic domains, including employment, housing, mobility, etc. (Dauwe et al. 2019).

The Belgian coastal zone is also characterised by an unbalanced population structure and demographic dynamics. Phenomena such as dejuvenation and ageing manifest themselves more strongly along the Belgian coast than in the rest of Flanders, most notably in the coastal municipalities (De Klerck 2011, Dauwe et al. 2019). For instance, the population aged 0-17 decreased in the entire coastal zone (-6.0%) (2010-2020), while the population aged 65 and over increased strongly within the same period (+23.0%) (figure 3). The age class 65+ represented 27.8% of the total population in the coastal zone in 2020, accounting for 118,455 people (ageing effect or "*vergrijzing*"). In contrast, only 15.3% of the coastal inhabitants are younger than 18 (65,366 people). Of the people older than 65, 30% is older than 80 (internal ageing effect or "*interne vergrijzing*"). Between 2010-2020, the age class 80+ in the coastal zone increased by 35%. Eight coastal municipalities appear on the list of the 20 Belgian municipalities with the oldest population (Rijksregister, 1 January 2021). Only the municipalities of Bruges and Bredene did not appear on this list.

Demographic structure coefficients also tell us something about the composition and evolution of the population (table 1). In general, the coastal zone can be divided into two realities, with the hinterland municipalities resembling the provincial trend, while the coastal municipalities follow a separate trajectory. In West Flanders in 2020, there were 153 60+ inhabitants for every 100 0-19 year-olds. For the coastal municipalities, this ageing rate (*verouderingsgraad*) increases up to 227. The grey pressure (*grijze druk*) (ratio of 65+ population to the 20-64 population) amounts to 54 in the coastal municipalities (per 100 persons of working age, there are 54 people over 60). The internal ageing effect (*interne vergrijzing*) (share of 80+ within the group 65+) amounts to 30 in the coastal municipalities. Meaning, the coastal municipalities score slightly lower in comparison with the hinterland municipalities and West Flanders in general (both 32).

On 1 January 2020, 203,726 households resided in the coastal zone (Rijksregister, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be). Between 2010 and 2020, the number of households increased by 7%. This growth exceeded that of the number of inhabitants (+2.7%). Over the past 10 years, the coastal zone has therefore been characterised by a "thinning" of households, with smaller average households. The average family size in the coastal zone is 2.06 persons. The municipalities in the hinterland have an average family size of 2.32; in the coastal municipalities the average family size is 2.00 persons (Rijksregister, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

Table 1. A selection of demographic structural coefficients for the coastal zone (coastal municipalities + hinterland municipalities) and the province of West Flanders (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

Indicator	Structural coefficients			
	Coastal municipalities	Hinterland municipalities	Coastal zone	West Flanders
Ageing rate (60+/0-19 year*100)	227	142	207	152
Grey pressure (65/ 20-64 year*100)	54	38	51	42
Internal ageing (80+/65+*100)	30	32	30	32

** More coefficients describing the demographic context of the coastal zone can be consulted and compared at provincies.incijfers.be, theme Bevolking.*

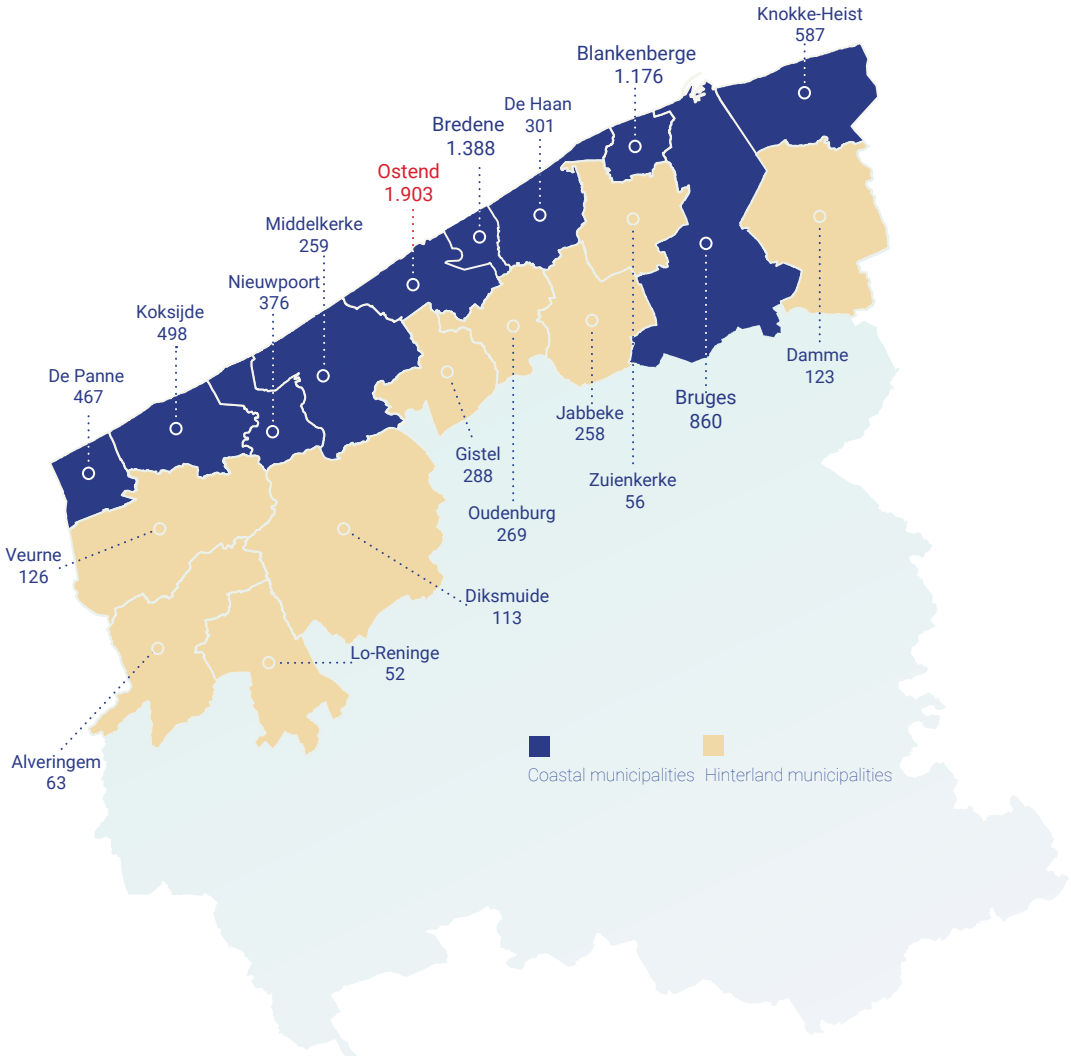

Figure 2. Population density (inhabitants/km²) in the coastal zone (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be, Coastal Portal).

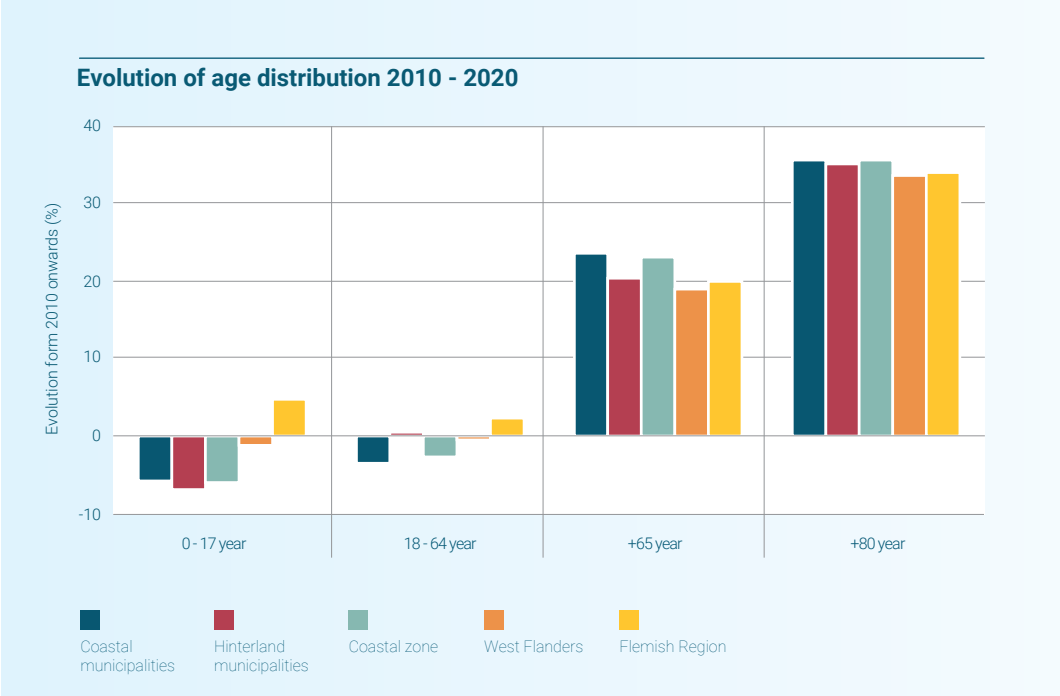

Figure 3. Evolution (%) of the age distribution (0-17 years, 18-64 years, 65+ years, 80+ years) of the coastal population and the province of West Flanders for the period 2010-2020 (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies incijfers.be).

Based on the characteristics of households, a household typology can be put together. A household can consist of a person living alone, several adults living together without under-aged children (household without child under the age of 20) or one or more adults living together with one or more under-aged children (household with children) (figure 4). The latter category also includes single-parent households. Of all households in the coastal zone, 38.7% are people living alone, 43.2% are households without children and 18.1% are household with children.

Coastal municipalities are characterised by the low proportion of households with children and the high proportion of single households (40.9%). The high degree of singles is distinctive for coastal municipalities (figure 4), something that can predominantly be explained by the ageing population and the 'terminus effect' (people who want to start a new life at the coast, often pension migrants). The share of households consisting of singles increased strongly (+16%) between 2010-2020 (figure 5). The increase in the number of singles was more pronounced in the hinterland municipalities (+26%) (Rijksregister, 1 January 2020 processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

Taking a closer look at the population characteristics, the indicators above point to a more urban character of the coastal municipalities: an older population, many people living alone, a high population density and many people with a foreign background. This urban profile is also reflected in the deprivation atlases (*Kansarmoedeatlas West Vlaanderen* 2011, 2014, 2017 and 2021), which contain an analysis at neighbourhood level. The neighbourhoods located along the coastal strip display a relatively more vulnerable profile in comparison to the neighbourhoods located behind this coastal strip. In order to determine the urban profile of the coastal strip and the associated problems, an analysis at neighbourhood or area level is necessary. The Kansarmoedeatlas 2021 shows that 25% of all families in the coastal zone live in a deprived neighbourhood, which is higher than the average for West Flanders (16%). In the coastal municipalities, an average of 29% of the families live in a deprived neighbourhood. For the hinterland municipalities, this is 7% of the households (Kansarmoedeatlas 2021, see also the Gemeentelijke steekkaarten - kansarmoede). The highest number of deprived neighbourhoods in West Flanders is located in Ostend (28) (figure 6). The two household types that are of particular concern are singles and single-parents.

In order to accomodate less prosperous families, the municipalities of the coastal zone provide social housing opportunities. There are 12,624 social housing units spread over the entire coastal zone. Ostend takes up a majority with 3,246 social rental houses (2020), representing a share of 8.9 social rental houses per 100 private households (figure 7). Other municipalities with a high share of social rental housing are Veurne (10.8) and Nieuwpoort (8.1). In comparison, the average share of social rental houses per 100 private households in the coastal zone is 6.2. In the province of West Flanders this share, at 6.4, is slightly higher.

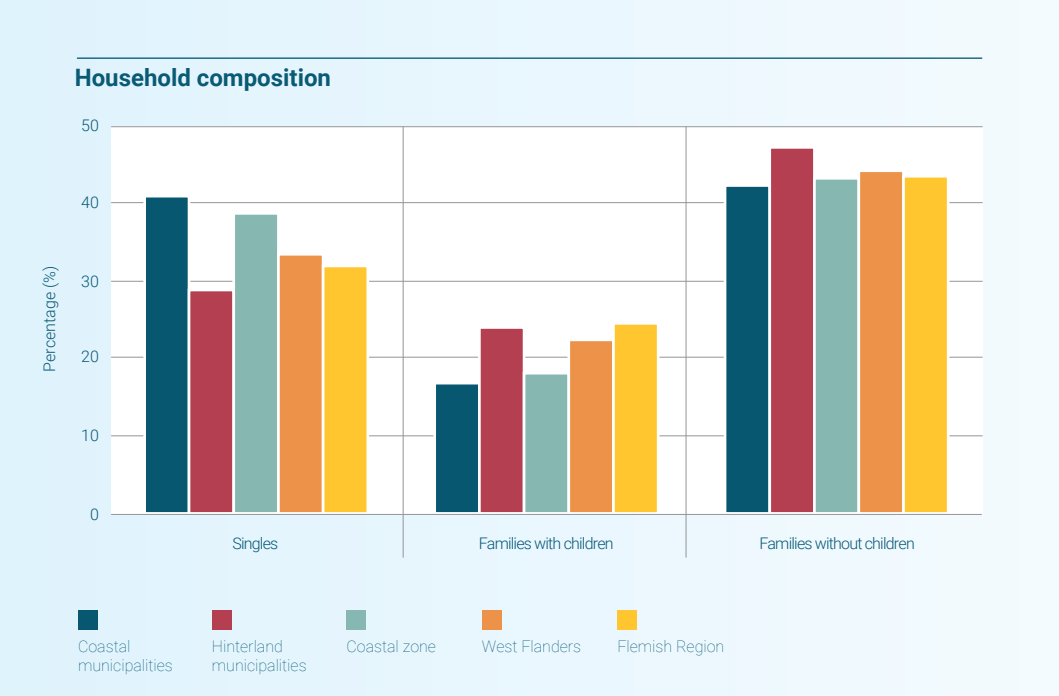

Figure 4. Proportion of households without children, with children and singles to the total number of households in the coastal zone and the province of West Flanders (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

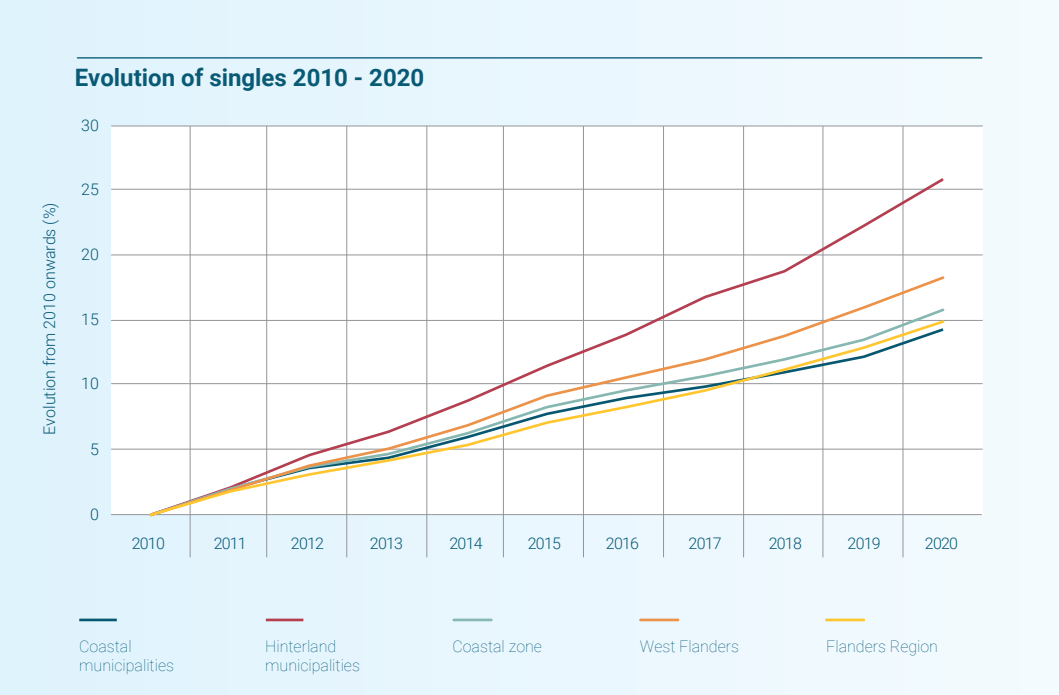

Figure 5. The relative evolution of the number of single households in the coastal zone and the province of West Flanders between 2010 and 2020 (Source: Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

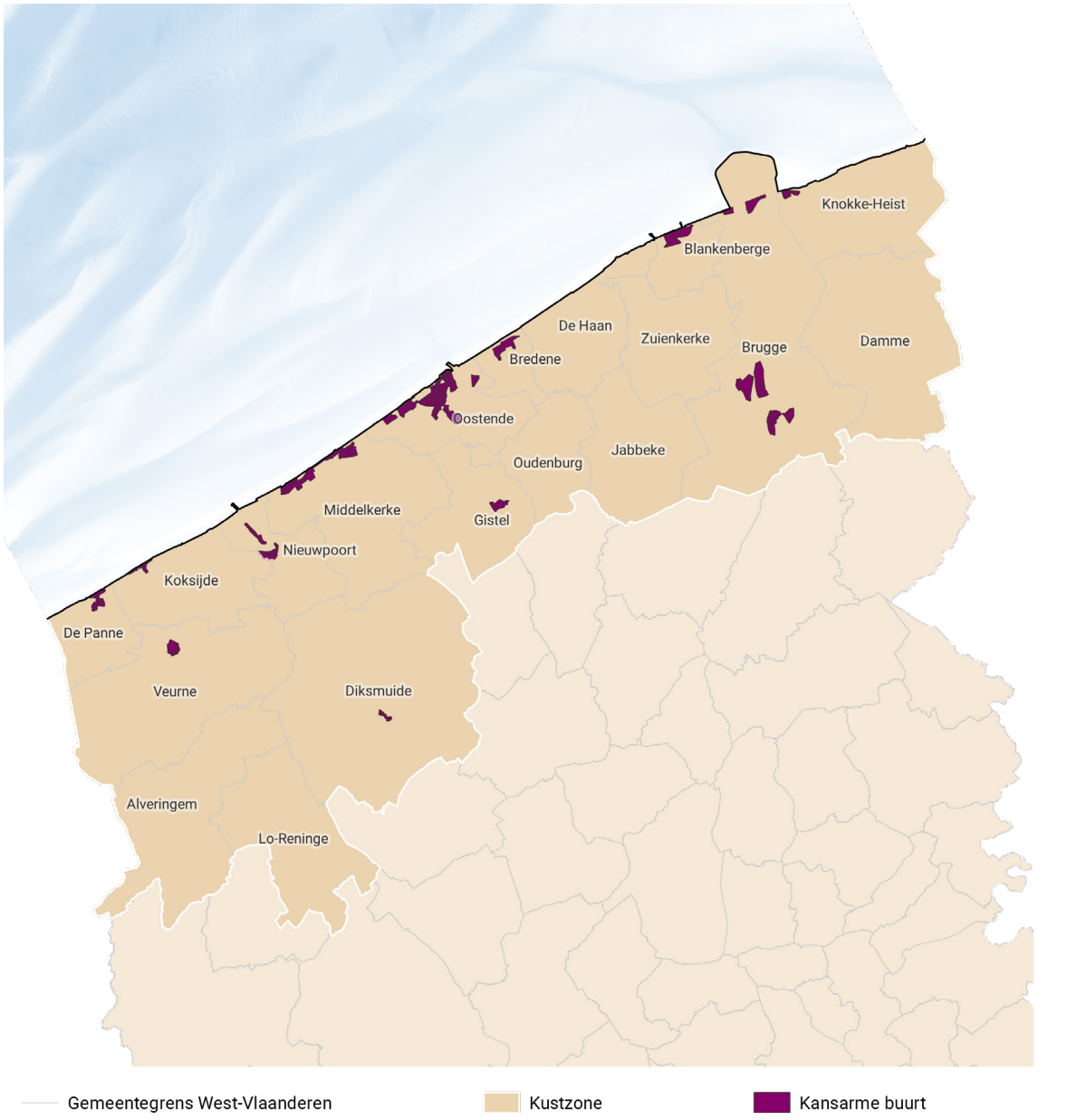

Figure 6. Location of the deprived neighbourhoods in the coastal zone (bordeaux) (Source: Kansarmoedeatlas 2021, Coastal Portal).

10.3.1.2 The coast and its inhabitation

On 1 January 2020, the coastal zone counted 352,232 housing units (table 2). In terms of housing type, a distinction is made between single-households and a multi-family household. At the Flemish and provincial level, two out of three housing facilities are single-household units; one in three facilities are situated in multi-household units. This ratio is slightly different in the coastal zone: 57% of the housing facilities are situated in multi-household units. The difference between the coastal municipalities and the hinterland municipalities is noteworthy. In the coastal municipalities, 63% of the facilities are situated in multi-household units. In the hinterland municipalities, this is only 15%.

The total number of housing units in the coastal municipalities is considerably higher than the number required to house its inhabitants. On average, 35% of housing units in the coastal zone are not used as a permanent home (= housing unit where a household is domiciled). Figure 8 shows the housing surplus, which we define here as non-domestic housing, as being primarily a coastal phenomenon. The hinterland municipalities have on average only 9% of housing facilities that are used for purposes other than permanent residence. Houses in coastal municipalities thus often serve other functions, like second-homes, business activities or even remain tenantless (Dauwe et al. 2019).

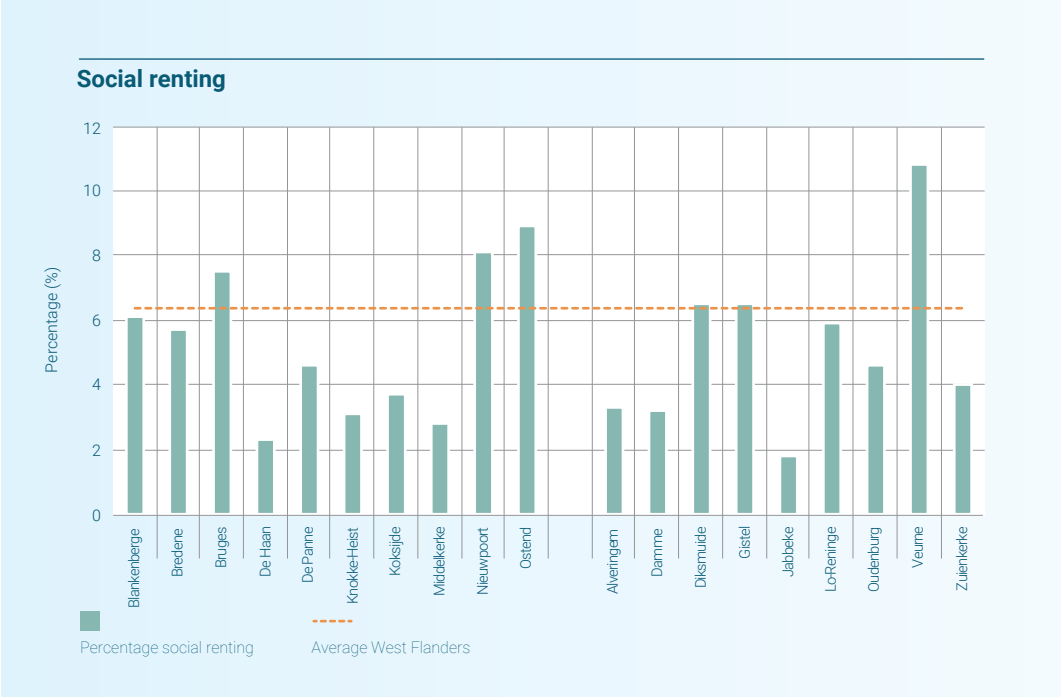

Figure 7. Municipal share of social rental housing (rented through social housing companies and social rental agencies) by the number of private households (Source: Vlaamse Maatschappij voor Sociaal Wonen, 1 January 2020, processed by department D&A | provincies.incijfers.be).

Table 2. Number of housing units by type of housing (Source: Kadaster and Rijksregister, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | provincies.incijfers.be)

Region	Housing units	Single household units		Multi-household units	
	Amount	Amount	Percentage	Amount	Percentage
Coastal municipalities	284,144	105,386	37.1%	178,758	62.9%
Hinterland municipalities	41,088	34,789	84.7%	6,299	15.3%
Coastal zone	325,232	140,175	43.1%	185,057	56.9%
West Flanders	690,361	443,377	64.2%	246,984	35.8%
Flemish Region	3,274,393	2,185,031	66.7%	1,089,362	33.3%

10.3.2 Economic environment[2]

The coastal zone is characterised by a diverse economic landscape with some of the country's largest economic gateways and sectors (two international seaports, an international airport, a commercial fishing industry, offshore energy production, tourism, etc.). The societal relevance of the Blue Economy and the importance of coastal agriculture is presented in separate thematic chapters within the **Knowledge Guide Coast and Sea 2022** (Dauwe et al. 2022) and approached in a more integrated way in the thematic chapter **Blue Economy and Innovation**. A numerical sectoral overview of the economic environment of the coastal zone can be found on the website of the West Flanders Development Agency.

[2] On 13 March 2020, a set of urgent measures aimed at containing the spread of the SARS-CoV2 virus (virus causing COVID-19) entered into force by MD. In addition, restrictive conditions for visiting the coastal region were imposed from 18 March onwards (MD of 18 March 2020). In the following weeks and months, these advices were adapted according to the health situation based on the guidelines of the National Safety Council (overview of current regulations, corona website FPS Public Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment). At the time of writing, restrictive conditions were still in place and no information was available yet on the social and economic impact of these measures on the region.

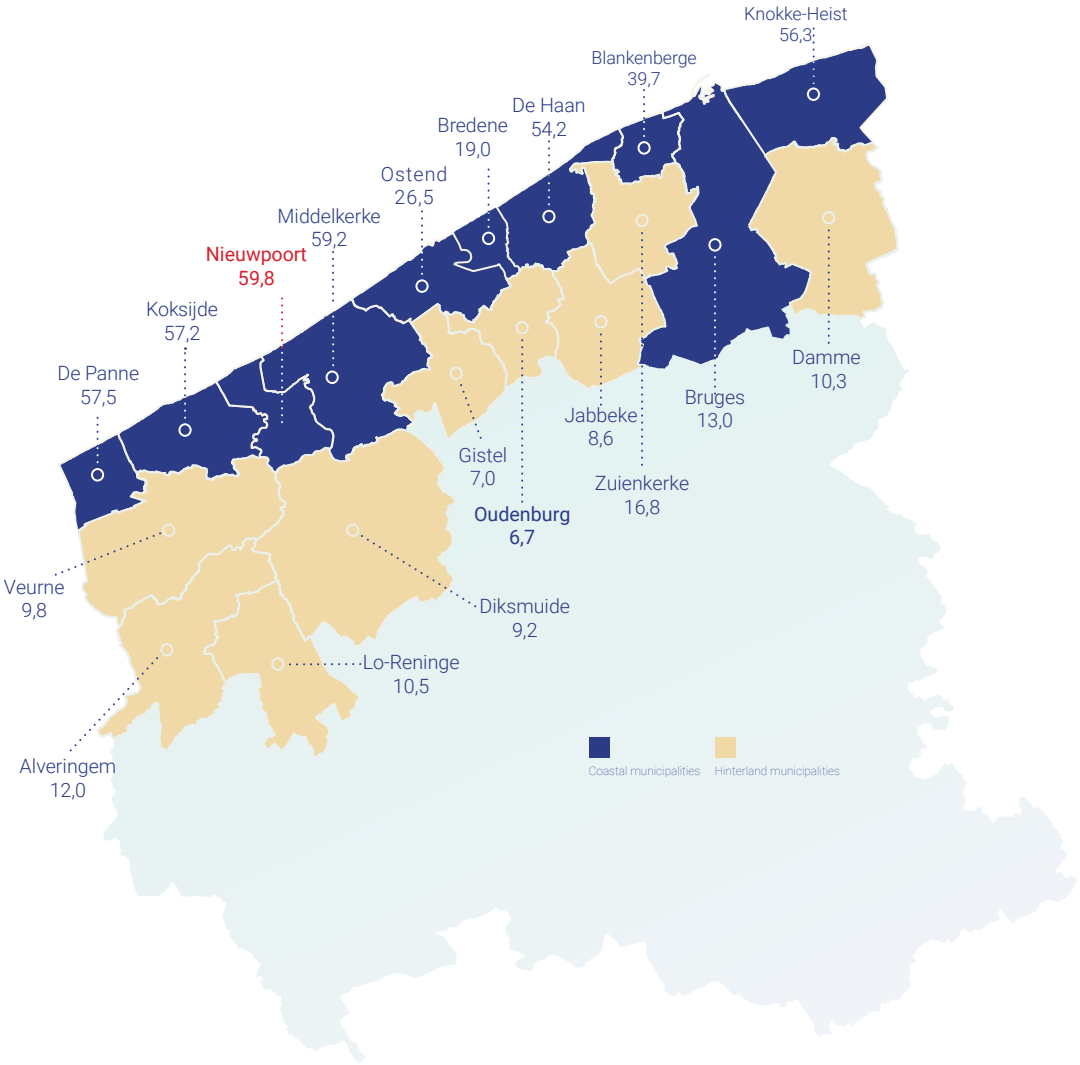

Figure 8. Share of housing units without domicile in the coastal zone (Source: FPS Finance, General administration of Patrimonial Documentation, 1 January 2020, processed by D&A | Province of West Flanders, Coastal Portal).

10.3.2.1 The coast and its labour market

On 31 December 2018, there were 186,534 professionally employed people (employees, self-employed (excluding secondary profession) and helpers) in the coastal zone. This is an increase of 4.9% compared to 31 December 2008. The coastal zone provides job opportunities for 34.3% of the total number of professionally employed people in West Flanders. At the end of 2018, the coastal and hinterland municipalities counted 125,358 and 21,972 employees, respectively 34.0% of the total in West Flanders. An additional 29,188 self-employed and helpers (excluding self-employed people in secondary profession) were active in the coastal municipalities and 10,016 in the hinterland municipalities. In this way, the coastal zone hosts 35.4% of the West Flemish total of self-employed people (RSV and NISSE, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency) (figure 9).

The coastal zone is characterised by a weak industrial base. At the end of 2018, the share of employees in the secondary sector[3] (construction + industry) was 13.7% in the coastal zone, compared to 26.0% in West Flanders. Moreover, no less than 88.2% (86.0% in the entire coastal zone) of the employees in coastal municipalities, are working in trade and services, of which tourism, catering, but also health care constitute an important part (see also Dauwe et al. 2019, West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020). However, in the tourism and catering sector, a large part of the jobs are seasonal. In comparison, 73.3% of all employees in West Flanders are active in trade and services (RSZ, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency) (figure 10).

[3] Primary sector: the economic sector that generates income from the production of food and raw materials;
Secondary sector: the economic sector that generates income from processing food and raw materials;
Tertiary sector: the economic sector in which companies seek to make a profit by selling their goods or services;
Quaternary sector: the non-commercial provision of services, e.g. government services and government-subsidised services.

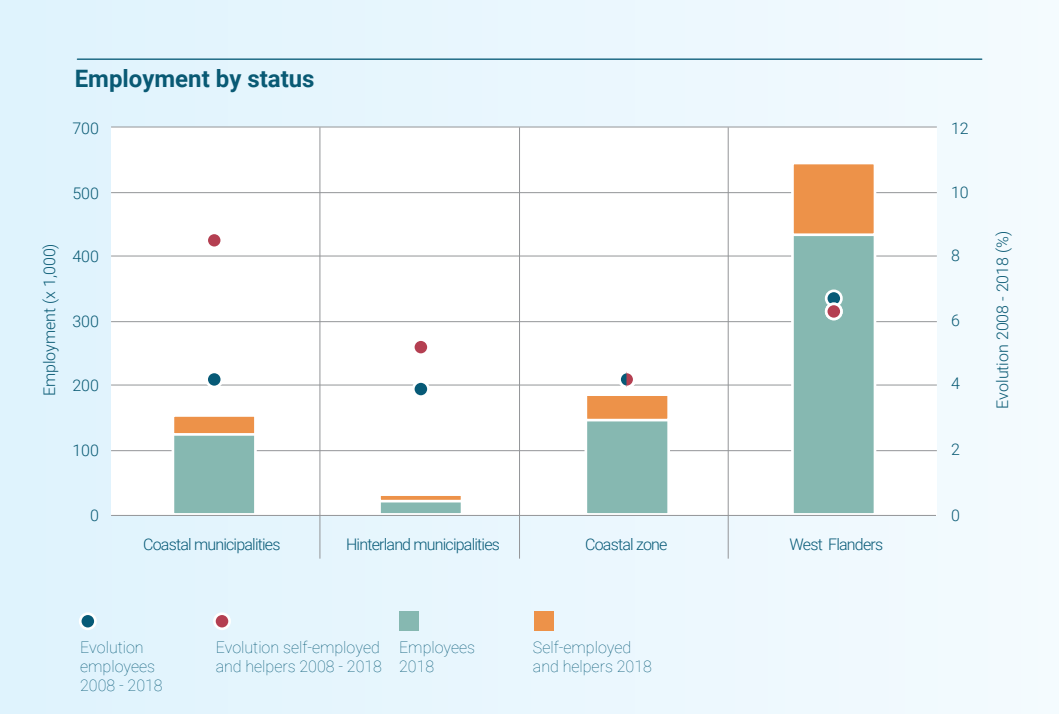

Figure 9. The number of employed people in the coastal zone, split into employees, self-employed and helpers on 31 December 2018, extended with the evolution in employed people compared to 2008 (Source: RSZ and NISSE, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

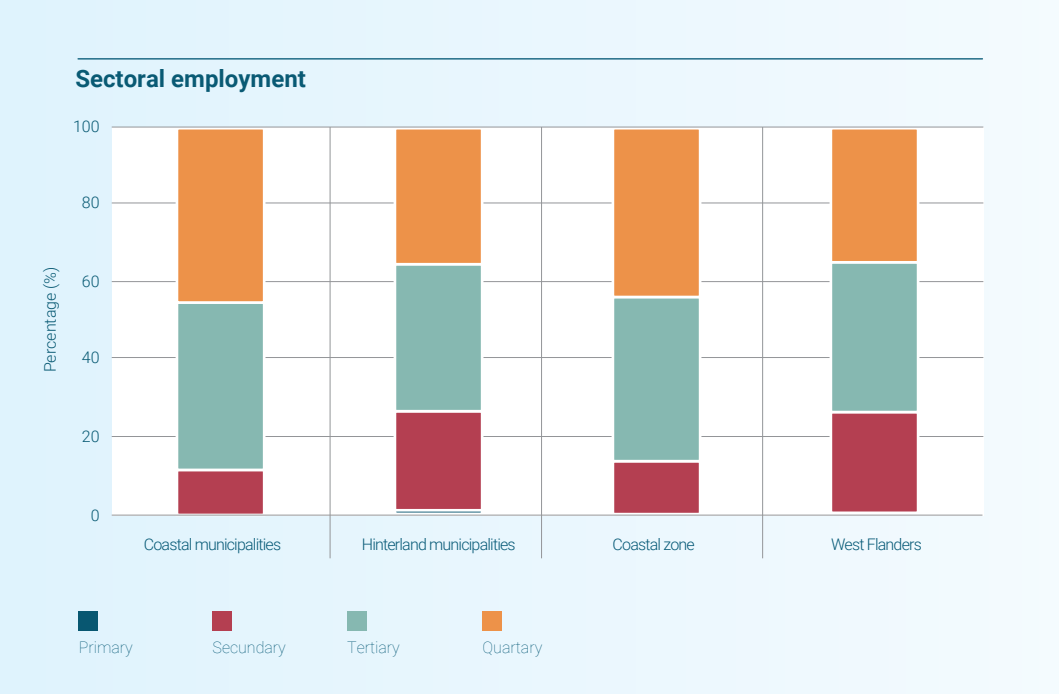

Figure 10. Share of sectoral employment for employees on 31 December 2018 (Source: RSZ, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

In 2018, 142,573 inhabitants in the coastal municipalities and 40,834 inhabitants in the hinterland municipalities belonged to the professionally active population (employed and unemployed jobseekers) aged between 18 and 64 or 33.4% of the total figure for West Flanders. In 2018, the activity rate - the ratio of the professionally active population to the total population aged between 18 and 64 - was 75.4% in the coastal zone. The coastal zone scores slightly below the provincial average (77.9%), but the differences are strongly region-specific. The employment rate - the ratio of the number of working people to the total population aged 18-64 - too, was somewhat lower in the coastal zone (70.6%) as compared to West Flanders in general (74.1%) (figure 11). With an unemployment rate - the number of non-working jobseekers in relation to the professionally active population aged between 18 and 64 - of 6.3%, the coastal zone performed worse than average in West Flanders (4.9%). However, this can mainly be attributed to the coastal municipalities (7.1%); in the hinterland municipalities the unemployment rate (3.6%) was noticeably lower (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). In 2019, the coastal zone counted 11,251 non-working jobseekers or 42.4% of the total of West-Flanders (VDAB, NEO, FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). Additionally, the coastal zone counted 421 older unemployed people[4]; or 46.2% of the provincial total. The unemployment pressure - the ratio of the number of non-working jobseekers and older unemployed relative to the current professionally active population (18-64 years) - is clearly higher in the coastal municipalities (5.4%) than in the hinterland municipalities (2.8%) and West Flanders (3.9%) (figure 12) (VDAB, NEO, FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). An important link can be made with the level of education. To illustrate, in Ostend, with an unemployment rate of over 10%, 36.2% of the children attending primary school have a lower-educated mother. Of those children, 48.1% receive an education allowance and 31.6% speak a language other than Dutch at home. In addition, 51.4% lives in a neighbourhood with an increased educational delay (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, processed by provincies.incijfers.be). In Ostend, 53.6% of the pupils in ordinary primary education are indicator pupils[5].

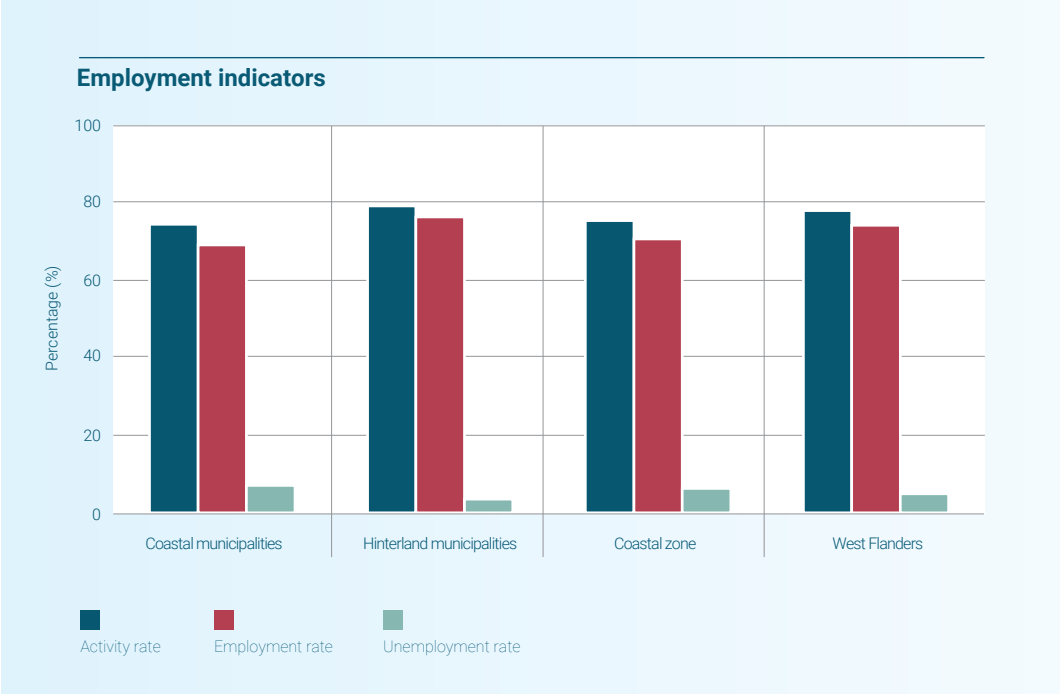

Figure 11. The activity rate, employment rate and unemployment rate in the coastal zone in 2018 (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

Of all coastal municipalities, only four (Bruges, Knokke-Heist, Ostend and Nieuwpoort) had a positive commuting balance among employees in 2017. In these municipalities the number of employees who came to work in the municipality, but lived elsewhere, exceeded the number of inhabitants working outside the municipality (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). In West Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020, provincies.incijfers.be and the Regions Dataset, labour market statistics are provided at municipal, district and provincial level.

[4] As of 2019, an older unemployed person must be 64 years old or older and have a professional background of 44 years.
[5] An indicator pupil is a pupil to whom at least one of the following criteria applies: the family has received an education allowance during the previous school year, the family has a limited income or the mother does not have a secondary education diploma or certificate of passing the sixth year in secondary education.

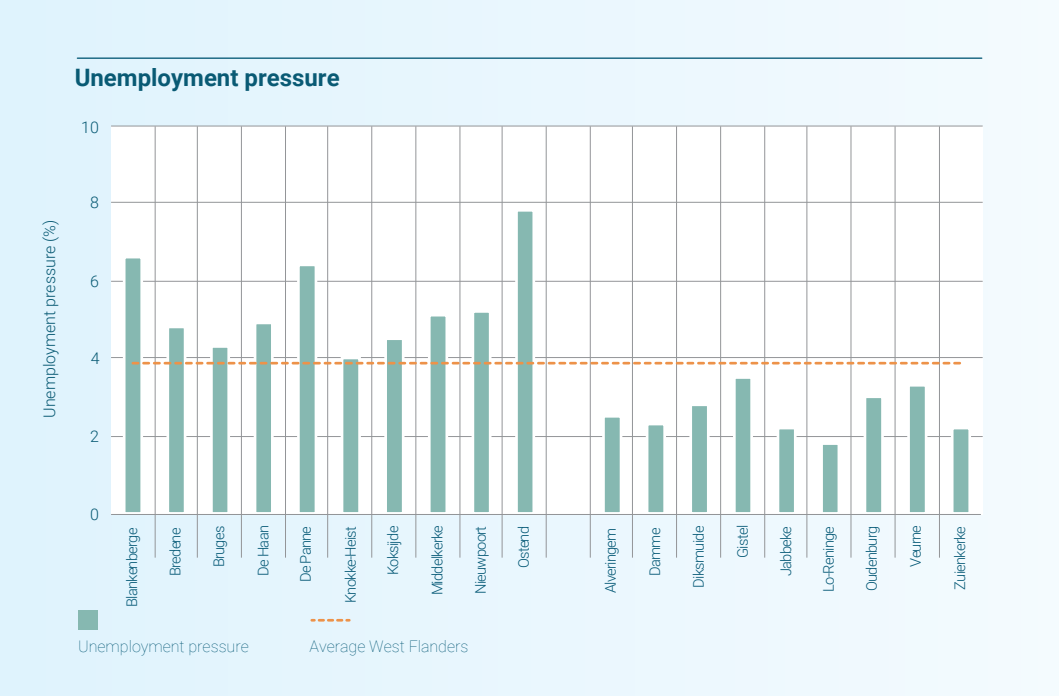

Figure 12. Unemployment pressure within the coastal zone in 2019 (Source: VDAB, RVA, FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

10.3.2.2 Wealth and entrepeneurship

In 2018, the produced wealth measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[6] per capita, was lower in West Flanders (39,312 euro) than in the Flemish Region in general (41,072 euro). Bruges (40,308 euro) is the only coastal district with a GDP per capita higher than the average of West Flanders (Institute for National Accounts (INR), processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). Between 2009-2018, the GDP per capita rose by an average of 2.9% per year in West Flanders, with the strongest increase in the district of Ypres (+3.6%) and the weakest in the district of Roeselare (+2.4%). Because GDP per capita in West Flanders grew more strongly, compared to Belgium, West Flanders was able to narrow the wealth gap on a national level; the gap with Flanders remained similar. Compared to the 2009 tax year, West Flanders made up ground in 2018 (+2.5%, compared to the Flemish Region +2.2%). This evolution is also apparent in the wealth index[7] (*welvaartsindex*) (West Flanders 104.7; Flemish Region 107.1) and has been noticeable for a number of years (FPS Economy (Statbel), Fiscal Statistics, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

In terms of the gross value added (GVA[8]), the district of Bruges, with a share of 24.2%, is in second place after Kortrijk in 2018. The coastal districts of Ostend and Veurne accounted for 10.5% and 5.0% of the total GVA, respectively. In 2018, the GVA per employee in West Flanders amounted to 96,131 euro, meaning West Flanders remains well below the Flemish average (102,986 euro) (West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020) with the exception of Veurne (108,930) and Ostend (103,733) (NBB, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

In 2019, enterprises registered in West Flanders generated a combined turnover of 104.3 billion euro representing 16.1% of the Flemish total (West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020). In the same year, there were 42,650 active enterprises in the coastal zone, representing 33.6% of the total for West Flanders. 32,022 of these active enterprises were located in the coastal municipalities, 10,628 in the hinterland. Of all active enterprises in the coastal zone, 68.4% are active in the tertiary sector, 16.7% in the secondary sector, 9.0% in the quaternary sector and 5.9% in the primary sector. At provincial level, the share in these sectors looks slightly different: 63.2% in the tertiary sector, 21.6% in the secondary sector, 7.7% in the primary sector and 7.5% in the quaternary sector. The economic dynamic of

[6] A measure of the economic wealth produced or generated in a country or region, used as an indicator to measure its level of prosperity. GDP is compiled by adding to gross value added to basic prices, taxes on products related to production and imports, and subtracting subsidies on products related to production and imports.
[7] This index compares the average income per inhabitant of a certain region (e.g. municipality) to the average income per inhabitant in the whole of Belgium. For Belgium, this index is set at 100.
[8] The difference between the market value of goods and services produced in one year and the market value of goods and services consumed in the production process (Statistiek Vlaanderen).

the coastal enterprises is higher too, compared to West-Flanders This is made evident by a number of indicators that describe this dynamic (table 3). These findings can be fully attributed to the urban character of most coastal municipalities as urban centres tend to record more start-ups and closures over time. The higher turbulence rate along the coast can also be partly explained by the nature of the activities. Among the frontrunners of the start-ups and closures is the hotel and catering industry, which is much more strongly represented in the coastal zone than on average in West Flanders. For instance in 2019, there were 4,301 active enterprises in the hotel and catering industry in the coastal zone (coastal municipalities: 3,648 active enterprises, hinterland municipalities: 653 active enterprises), accounting for 50.4% of the province of West Flanders. The coastal municipalities alone accounted for 42.8% of the number of hotel and catering businesses in West Flanders. The proportion of active enterprises in the hotel and catering industry compared with the total number of active enterprises is: 11.4% in the coastal municipalities, 6.1% in the hinterland municipalities, 10.1% in the coastal zone, and 6.7% in West Flanders. Additionally, 4,485 enterprises were active in retail in the coastal zone in 2019 (coastal municipalities: 3,607 active enterprises; hinterland municipalities: 878 active enterprises), accounting for 39.2% of the province of West Flanders. The coastal municipalities alone account for 31.5% of the number of retail enterprises in West Flanders (FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

Table 3. Economic dynamics of enterprises in the coastal zone in 2019 (Source: FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

Region	Founding ratio* (%)	Exit ratio** (%)	Turbulence rate*** (%)
Coastal municipalities	9.8	7.0	16.8
Hinterland municipalities	8.1	5.8	13.9
Coastal zone	9.3	6.7	16.0
West Flanders	9.0	6.0	15.0

**Founding ratio: the ratio of the number of founded enterprises to the number of active enterprises.*
***Exit ratio: the ratio of closures and bankruptcies to the number of active enterprises.*
****Turbulence rate: the sum of the founding- and exit ratio.*

In terms of the number of enterprises, the coastal zone has an average of 29.2 commercial enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants (compared to 23.9 in West Flanders) (2020). In the coastal municipalities this amounts to 31.5 commercial enterprises per 1,000 inhabitants, in the hinterland municipalities 20.2. The highest number of commercial properties in the coastal zone (excluding unoccupied properties per 1,000 inhabitants) is recorded for Knokke-Heist (44.4), Nieuwpoort (43.3) and De Panne (37.3). The highest vacancy rate (vacant commercial properties compared with all commercial premises) is recorded for De Panne (20.2%), Koksijde (13.5%) and Blankenberge (12.4%) (2020) (Locatus, Statbel, processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

The coastal zone covers 36.8% of the total surface area of West Flanders. In terms of surface area used for business activities, the coastal zone accounted for 23.5% of the total area of West Flanders on 1 January 2019. In West Flanders, 17.5% of the built-up area is used for business activities. The proportion of this area used for business activities is higher in the coastal municipalities than in the hinterland municipalities (16.9% compared to 10.4%) (FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency).

In 2017, the spatial productivity[9] equalled 42.4% in the coastal zone, 52.8% in the coastal municipalities, 21.8% in the hinterland municipalities, and 31.7% in West Flanders in general (Vlaamse Arbeidsrekening and FPS Economy (Statbel) processed by the West Flanders Development Agency). This means that 42.4 people were working in the coastal zone per hectare of economically occupied land. These differences are caused by the different morphology and economic structure of these regions. On the one hand, relatively less industry and fewer users of large spaces, and on the other hand, more trade and services with offices and high-rise buildings, as well as more employees per unit of land. Until 2008, spatial productivity in West Flanders remained relatively stable, after which the indicator showed a declining trend until 2016. In the coastal zone, land productivity has been following a declining trend since 2007. These declines are the effect of a growing spatial separation of living and working. Commercial sub-urbanisation or migration from the city towards the surrounding countryside, following residential sub-urbanisation, has increased significantly in recent years. The Flemish Spatial Structure Plan (RSV) has not yet been able to curb this trend.

[9] Spatial productivity is the ratio of gross domestic product (GDP) to the use of space, expressed in hectares (ha) of built-up area (Department of Environment and Spatial Development).

Statistics on the socio-economic situation on municipal, district and provincial level are also provided in West-Vlaanderen Ontcijferd 2020, provincies.incijfers.be and the Regions Dataset. Figures, tables, graphs and maps with respect to the socio-economic situation of the coastal zone can be compiled per selected zone via the data portal of provincies.incijfers.be.

10.4 Sustainable use

A physical environment with sufficient public space and qualitative living conditions are essential for a sustainable living environment and the wellbeing of inhabitants. The coast holds some advantages in this respect, given the beneficial effect of sea air on health (Hooyberg et al. 2020). However, the (metropolitan) urban profile and the high level of deprivation indicate that there are also many challenges at the coast (Maelfait et al. 2012, Dauwe et al. 2019, West Flanders Development Agency, provincies.incijfers.be). The main concerns relate to the lack of a balanced and healthy social environment. For example, the rapid ageing of the population, the increasing internal ageing (80+ years of age), the amount of people living alone, the various relocations and the pressure from tourists and second-home inhabitants create a skewed social and demographic mix which (especially in the seaside neighbourhoods) results in an atypical model of society and pressure on the housing market (Meire and Bracke 2005, Rijksregister, Maelfait et al. 2012, Province of West Flanders 2015, Dauwe et al. 2019 (see also the regional policy plans, **10.1 Policy context** and **10.3.1 Social environment**).

10.4.1 Sustainable living at the coast – the ageing effect and second-homes

Proportionally, significantly more elderly people live on the coast than in the rest of Flanders, resulting in a different societal model. Moreover, according to recent projections, the (internal) ageing of the population in the coastal zone will continue to rise until at least 2030, just like in other Flemish towns and cities (Province of West Flanders 2015, Government of Flanders (2016), provincies.incijfers.be) (see also **10.3.1 Social environment**). This phenomenon of a strongly ageing population composition is further reinforced by the second-home residents. Research has shown that in 80% of cases (>120,000 people), owners of second-homes on the coast are older than 50 and generally do not have children under 18 living at home (WES 2008, *tweede verblijven aan de kust*, part 1 and part 2; Westtoer 2016). On the basis of the provincial tax on second-homes, it is estimated that 30% of the housing units in the coastal zone are used as second-homes, representing approximately 97,000 housing units (situation 2017, calculated by D&A Province of West Flanders). However, on average they are only 49 nights a year are occupied by its owner (Impact tweede verblijvers voor het Kusttoerisme, Westtoer 2016). The use of the housing stock for purposes other than residential purposes can have negative consequences for society, such as an increased sense of insecurity and a lack of social cohesion. On the other hand, a large stock of second-homes at the coast is one of the preconditions for the tourist industry as second-home tourism generates a turnover of approximately 1.5 billion euro (Impact tweede verblijvers voor het Kusttoerisme, Westtoer 2016) (see thematic chapter **Tourism and recreation**).

The Province of West Flanders is actively pursuing the coastal ageing program (*Vergrijzing aan de kust*) where the coast can be regarded as a laboratory for the future ageing of the population of Flanders. For example, the reports Vergrijzing aan de kust: lust of last? (2012) and Onderzoek naar verhuisbewegingen van senioren aan de kust en de impact op de woonmarkt en zorgsector outline the situation of the ageing population at the coast, while formulating a number of bottlenecks and challenges. The Ruimte voor ouderen (2017) inspiration guide provides an overview of the various types of housing for elderly people and tries to respond to the housing needs of coastal residents in West Flanders. Vandekerckhove et al. (2015) analysed the relocation movements of people aged 80+ at the coast, including the consequences for the housing market and the health care sector in the coastal zone. The study reveals a number of trends: the retired migrant is insufficiently prepared for the consequences of ageing, a social network is important, and the housing options along the coast appear unsuitable. A number of challenges and recommendations are also formulated: e.g. consider ageing as an asset (e.g. opportunities for voluntary work, economic opportunities, etc.) and focus on adapted and self-reliant housing and awareness-raising (see also De Klerck 2011, website West Flanders Development Agency). The liveability study for the coast (Meire and Bracke 2005) also shows that the mutual involvement of residents is poor, especially in the seaside neighbourhoods. For many single-living (senior) residents at the coast, who left their social environment behind, there is a genuine chance of social isolation. The study therefore emphasises the importance of restoring and strengthening personal social networks.

10.4.2 Economic development at the coast

The guideline for the socio-economic development of the province of West Flanders, and hence the coastal zone, is described in the recent Master Plan Economy 2020-2025 of the West Flanders Development Agency. This plan forms the framework for the structural valorisation of earlier efforts within the West Deal strategy (2013-2018) and must respond to new challenges such as the consequences of the corona crisis and Brexit.

In the former West Deal strategy, a number of guidelines that specifically applied to the coastal zone were elaborated upon, such as the possibilities of Ostend becoming a hub for Blue Energy, the development of the port of Zeebrugge, touristic opportunities for the Ostend-Bruges International Airport, etc. Another concrete application of West Deal is Factories for the Future (FvT) (*Fabrieken voor de Toekomst*). These factories[10] reflect the key economic areas of the province and aim to reinforce enterprises and provide them access to innovation, knowledge and expertise. In the maritime context, there's the FvT Blue Energy, based at Ostend, which focuses on the development of wind, wave and tidal energy.

West-Vlaanderen Groeit - Ambitie 2030 (2015) investigated the state of affairs of the West Flemish economy and its future prospects. Five future visions and five specific work areas were formulated, in which the economy in the coastal zone (blue energy, ports, care economy, etc.) was also addressed. Additionally, in the framework of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD, Directive 2008/56/EC), a first socio-economic analysis of the use of Belgian marine waters and the costs related to the degradation of the marine environment was conducted in 2012 (Belgian State 2012, Börger et al. 2016), of which an update was published in 2018 (Volckaert and Rommens 2018). These studies partially address the socio-economic developments along the coast, including the accommodation of tourists and their expenditure (see also thematic chapters **Tourism and recreation** and **Nature and environment**).

10.4.3 Urban vision development at the coast

The Territorial Development Program for the Coastal Zone (T.OP Kustzone) was launched in November 2015 under the stewardship of the Department of Environment and Spatial Development (OMG) with the aim of tackling large-scale spatial challenges in the coastal zone in cooperation with the Province of West Flanders and the municipal authorities (see also **10.1 Policy context** and thematic chapter **Tourism and recreation**). Urban development issues are compiled into a supported vision or master plan by a group of experts. Such a plan can subsequently be put into practice by the municipalities by means of a spatial implementation plan or by issuing permits. Projects applicable to the coastal zone are being designed in three areas: the 'urbanised coastal zone' (*verstedelijkte kustzone*), the 'polder space' (*polderruimte*) and the 'land-sea interaction zone' (*land-zee interactie*) (including the dunes). Each of these areas has a central theme and focuses on specific projects or on knowledge building and sharing. Within the 'urbanised coastal zone', the general focus is put on densification, accessible locations and on providing a wide range of housing options (e.g. for families, the elderly, etc.). This also involves looking at how the built-up area can contribute to robust coastal protection (see also thematic chapter **Safety against flooding**). The 'land-sea interaction' area (including the dunes) focuses on the potential optimisation of the connectivity between the various dune areas (primarily the western coastal zone). The 'polder space' area mainly focuses on the role and place of water in the environment and in all possible forms of use. An overview of the realised and planned projects can be consulted at www.topkustzone.be.

In the past, research was conducted under the platform LABO RUIMTE, a partnership between the Team *Vlaamse Bouwmeester* and OMG, on how to come up with sustainable solutions to complex spatial issues in the coastal zone. For example, Stedelijk Systeem Kust examined a robust reconversion of the urban system (Stedelijk Systeem Kust 2017). Additionally, there was the design study Metropolitaan Kustlandschap 2100 on the development potential of the coast up to 2100. In the context of a changing climate and within the socio-economic context, the coastal zone was considered one functionally coherent area, one urban metabolism (Geldof and De Bock 2014). Within the Integrated Territorial Development Plan for West Flanders (based on the West Deal strategic plan), the Health Care Accelerator project was implemented. In this plan, local authorities, health care institutions, companies and knowledge institutions collaborated to provide a sustainable answer to the needs of the growing group of elderly citizens.

[10] There are currently five Factories for the Future: New Materials, Food, Blue Energy, Mechanical Engineering and Mechatronics, and Health Care Economics.

Finally, there are also vision or planning processes with a socio-economic dimension that focus partly or entirely on the seaside, such as the Coastal Vision project (formerly *Complex Project Kustvisie*) which focuses on the development of sustainable measures for long-term coastal protection, the marine spatial plan (MSP 2020-2026, RD of 22 May 2019) for the Belgian part of the North Sea (see also thematic chapters **Safety against flooding**, **Nature and environment** and **Integrated maritime policy**) and the Think Tank North Sea (think tank where representatives from policy, science, industry and society at large develop thematic visions towards a sustainable North Sea with a 2050 time horizon).

Legislation reference list

Overview of the relevant legislation on federal and Flemish level. The national legislation can be consulted on the Belgian official journal and the Justel-database, the Flemish legislation is available on the Flemish Codex.

Belgian and Flemish legislation		
Dates	**Title**	**File number**
Decrees		
Decree of 18 May 1999	Decreet houdende de organisatie van ruimtelijke ordening	1999-05-18/33
Royal Decrees		
RD of 23 June 2010	Koninklijk besluit betreffende de mariene strategie voor de Belgische zeegebieden	2010-06-23/05
Ministerial Decrees		
MD of 13 March 2020	Ministerieel besluit houdende dringende maatregelen om de verspreiding van het coronavirus COVID-19 te beperken	2020-03-13/02
MD of 18 March 2020	Ministerieel besluit houdende dringende maatregelen om de verspreiding van het coronavirus COVID-19 te beperken	2020-03-18/01