



Evaluation of the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ)

Management Summary

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Authors

Leonique Korlaar
Frank Bongers
Jessica Steur
Menno Driesse



Management summary

Evaluation context, objectives and methodology

On 2 April 1999, The Flanders Marine Institute was established (Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee, VLIZ) by the Flemish Government, the Province of West Flanders and Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) in order to create a central and flexible support structure for the marine sciences in Flanders.

While the current management agreement (MA) will end (by the end of 2016), an assessment is required, conform the evaluation article of the MA, of VLIZ's performance regarding its strategic and operational objectives, KPIs and the additional tasks given to VLIZ. Because the former MA ended in 2009 and the new MA has only been in place since 2012, the current evaluation has a longer time frame (focusing on the period 2010-2015 regarding the ex post evaluation). In order to determine the impact of VLIZ's activities, the evaluation focused on the period 2006-2015, because the impact is usually manifested in the long term. In addition, the evaluation looked at the coming period 2017-2021 (ex ante part of the evaluation). The results of this evaluation will form the basis for drafting the new MA.

The ex post part of the evaluation consists of a content analysis and a financial analysis. The evolution of VLIZ is also taken into account. The ex ante part of the evaluation consists of an analysis of VLIZ's draft strategic plan for the period 2017-2021. In addition, recommendations are formulated to further improve VLIZ's operations and performance.

In order to provide the most appropriate and substantiated responses to the evaluation questions, we used several research methods: desk study (split into a content, financial, and reference analysis), a series of interviews among stakeholders and an international benchmark. The evaluation also included consulting an international panel of experts who visited VLIZ. The findings were combined in a SWOT analysis, in which the internal strengths and weaknesses of VLIZ were identified as well as the external opportunities and threats.

VLIZ objectives, organisation and activities

VLIZ is the central coordination and information platform for marine and coastal scientific research in Flanders. VLIZ is an autonomous institute with the legal status of a non-profit organisation under Belgian law and functions as a link between science, government and industry. As a partner in various projects and networks, VLIZ also promotes and supports the international image of Flemish marine scientific research and international marine education.

The Flanders Marine Institute's objectives and operations are currently specified in the MA that runs from 2012 to 2016 with the Flemish government. As VLIZ has no research mandate, its activities are therefore focused on science supporting activities. VLIZ's core activities (compliant with the MA), are:

- Facilitate a network of marine scientists and other parties involved by offering a platform – by means of a Scientific Committee - , contributing to integrated projects and networks, organising meetings, conferences and scientific awards, issuing publications, mapping relevant expertise in Flanders on a permanent basis, and promoting and presenting this expertise both in Flanders and abroad.

- Accommodate and support international organisations like the UNESCO/IOC Project Office for IODE and the European Marine Board – ESF Secretariat at the InnovOcean site in Ostend.
- Support marine scientific research by providing research equipment and infrastructure for common use, such as the earlier research vessel 'Zeeleeuw' and currently 'Simon Stevin' – and the purchase, expansion, maintenance and management of other research equipment and research infrastructures for common use (including shore facilities).
- Manage and further develop the Marine Data and Information Centre (VMDC).
- Manage the library 'Zeebibliotheek': acquire, access, and distribute marine scientific information.
- Provide policy-relevant scientific information in order to support a sustainable and scientifically based policy for the coastal area, the marine areas and the adjacent estuaries. Within this scope, VLIZ ensures the production of the 'Compendium for Coast and Sea'.

The Flemish government also charged VLIZ with additional ('special') assignments to support international organisations. For example, VLIZ had the mandate to represent the Flemish government in the Belgian delegation at the UNESCO Executive Council and the General Assembly of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). In addition, VLIZ was given the responsibility to provide accommodation and support (3.5 FTE) for the UNESCO / IOC Project Office for IODE. Since 2006, VLIZ has also had the mandate to act as expert for the Belgian delegation in the European thematic working groups on marine science (the European Marine Board, EMB), the mandate to support the Joint Programming Initiative Healthy and Productive Seas and Oceans (JPI Oceans) since 2011 and since 2012 the mandate to accommodate and support the European Marine Observation and Data Network (EMODnet).

Strategic priorities 2010-2015

The key priorities in VLIZ activities over the past period (2012 – 2016) were the construction (and deployment) of the RV Simon Stevin, the purchase and renovation of equipment for the Marine Station Oostende (MSO) and the investments in maintenance and technical support for the deployment of ROV Genesis. Other key priorities were publishing the Compendium for Coast and Sea and the provision of policy-relevant information in the form of Policy Informing Papers (BINs) and Briefs (PIBs). In addition, VLIZ successfully focused on improving its international profile and the communication towards education, the general public and the industry. Finally, VLIZ was recognized as a charity in 2014. Thanks to this recognition, VLIZ can carry out philanthropic projects that promote scientific knowledge on coastal and marine areas.

Evolution in working and governance

VLIZ has, as an organisation, grown professionally over the years in terms of working and governance. The composition and functioning of the Board of Directors and the Scientific Committee were the first to be reviewed. Secondly, its HR policy was professionalised by creating job profiles for every employee. The evaluation procedures were also reviewed and department heads were required to introduce individual performance assessments. In addition, the labour regulations were updated. However, important points of concern are still the dependence on external project funding for the payment of several employees, as well as

maintaining the 'typical character' of VLIZ and the 'group feeling' (which is under pressure due to the growth of the institute).

Financial reporting

In accordance with the MA and VLIZ statutes, a financial audit is conducted annually by two government commissioners. VLIZ also uses the services of an auditor to approve the annual reports. The institute reports extensively on VLIZ operations, including financial performance, in its annual reports. As such, VLIZ fulfils its reporting obligations as stated in the MA.

In addition, we conclude that VLIZ has grown substantially over the years 2010 to 2015 in terms of financial resources. The total yearly income has increased from 4.7 million euro to nearly 7.6 million euro. The income from operations, international tasks and investment funding grew by 40 percent. These financial resources also have a leverage effect: external funding has almost doubled in the past five years. In other words, the combined income of more than EUR 3 million from operating resources and investment subsidies from the Flemish government provides a solid basis for VLIZ.

VLIZ's role and status

VLIZ is seen, and in our view rightly, by interview respondents as an important player (both nationally as internationally) in the marine sciences. The institute is regarded as a 'hub' for the Flemish research community and has the potential to further strengthen this position in the future.

Based on the international benchmark, we note that organisations similar to VLIZ are rare. This is primarily because VLIZ does not perform research itself and only has a supporting role. Institutes such as GEOMAR and NIOZ spend much of their time performing (basic) research on seas and open oceans. Thus NIOZ is also able to attract a great deal of external funding from European projects. Moreover, many institutes own at least one research vessel (as opposed to VLIZ, which works together with DAB Vloot). It struck us that the institutes we looked at charge a fee for the use of their research vessel; unlike VLIZ, where researchers can use the Simon Stevin free of charge. Not having to pay for ship time (and not having to calculate these costs in project proposals), means that researchers are not always aware of the value of ship time. This leads, among other things, to undervaluation and underutilisation of ship time by researchers.

VLIZ's output

VLIZ reports annually on its results. Based on these annual reports, we conclude that VLIZ has achieved the agreed objectives regarding KPIs. Despite the fact that the KPIs reflect VLIZ's operations and impact, there is criticism of the current list of KPIs. A major criticism by interviewees is that the KPIs put too much emphasis on communication and education. Of course, these are two of the most important objectives, but not the only tasks carried out by the institute. The KPIs need to be more in line with VLIZ's other strategic and operational objectives, for example indicators that highlight research-facilitating tasks (actual use and impact of the research vessel Simon Stevin as well as the data centre and library), and that focus on the institute's growing internationalization.

Significant results (broadly speaking) in this period consist of the construction of the RV Simon Stevin and the deployment of the ship in the ESFRI-infrastructure (LifeWatch and ICOS), archiving and unlocking a large number of datasets, the digitalisation of a large part of the library collection and publishing the Compendium for Coast and Sea.

Scientific impact

VLIZ has a direct and indirect impact on various activities within the research and innovation chain. For example, the provision of research infrastructure (like the RV Simon Stevin and Marine Station Ostend) and data (systems), has a positive impact on knowledge creation. Moreover, the (scientific) publications, the research projects and the international collaborations where VLIZ takes part in lead to knowledge transfer and exploitation. Finally, VLIZ also contributes to knowledge valorisation through its international collaboration and communication activities (think of patents, teaching materials and policy advice).

We detect some tension between VLIZ's desire to be able to conduct more research tasks and its current mandate. Consequently, several activities seem to be in a rather grey area; the dividing line between supporting research and implementing research is not always clear. Assigning VLIZ a research mandate would enable it to conduct research, thereby possibly increasing the (direct) scientific impact.

Impact on policy

VLIZ has reciprocal connections: on the one hand it informs policy makers on scientific research. On the other hand, VLIZ informs researchers on policy related issues. To achieve the former, VLIZ has several communication tools such as Policy Informing Papers (BINs) and Briefs (PIBs) on topics that are relevant in the current social and political system and in which VLIZ has a strong knowledge position. For example, VLIZ plays an active role in drawing attention to the topic of Ocean Literacy. Its policy information division is responsible for these activities. However, VLIZ has no mandate for providing policy *advice* and therefore is quite reactive (instead of proactive). Consequently, VLIZ's knowledge and expertise are underutilised for policy purposes.

Societal and economic impact

It is difficult to determine the societal and especially the economic impact of VLIZ. Thanks to publications such as 'De Grote Rede', 'De Zeekrant' and the online magazine 'VLIZine', VLIZ is reaching the general public more and more. Its educational activities (e.g. issuing teaching packages) and other informative products like photos and videos also create societal impact.

SWOT analysis

VLIZ's greatest strength is that it has developed over the years into a well-known and valued Institute for facilitating marine sciences in Flanders (and beyond). This position is recognised by all stakeholders and is improving. VLIZ's current weaknesses are mainly related to its dependence on third parties, as is apparent in various activities and files, such as the mandate for research and policy advice, accommodation, the deployment of the research vessel or the allocation of resources. A related issue is the reliance on external project and infrastructure financing (ESFRI) to pay for employees. Finally, the knowledge and expertise of VLIZ seem to be currently underutilised due to the lack of both a research mandate as well as a mandate for providing policy advice. The key opportunities for the future lie in these areas.

Recommendations for the Flemish Government (summary)

1. Renew the management agreement with VLIZ for the period 2017-2021. Make sure the current addenda are integrated in the same agreement. For any additional mandates given to VLIZ, the strategic and operational objectives stated in the management agreement need to be revised. The new key performance indicators (KPIs) also need to be drawn up in line with VLIZ's various tasks and roles.

2. Make sure the Flemish government's subsidy is in line with VLIZ's ultimate mandate. Increasing the amount of resources would for example make it possible to extend the deployment of the RV Simon Stevin (such as a larger number of multi-day trips). This requires all stakeholders to have a good overview of the costs of deploying the RV Simon Stevin. They will have to be aware of these costs, especially if VLIZ intends to conduct research activities itself in the future (see below).
3. Expand VLIZ's mandate in relation to research activities. Despite the fact that supporting research will be a crucial task for VLIZ's future operations, we see that in the previous period, VLIZ has (logically) moved towards conducting research. This creates opportunities to improve VLIZ's impact in the future. An important requirement is to avoid (unfair) competition with universities.
4. Make better use of VLIZ's knowledge and expertise for policy making. At this moment VLIZ is (still) underutilised as a policy supporting institute. A way to improve the policy impact is by providing VLIZ with a mandate for policy advice, giving VLIZ the opportunity to act more proactively. VLIZ's knowledge and expertise can also be applied to develop the blue economy in Flanders.
5. Provide clarity about VLIZ's new site location. At the time of writing, no final decision has yet been made. This creates uncertainty and doubt for VLIZ as well as for its employees.

Recommendations for VLIZ (summary)

1. Continue the activities, but keep in mind the added value of (extra) activities. VLIZ has developed into an institute for supporting marine and coastal scientific research in Flanders (and beyond). This position should be maintained and improved where possible. Expanding VLIZ's activities in the direction of research is in our view a logical and valuable development. An important requirement is to avoid (unfair) competition with universities. Moreover, the decision whether to expand current tasks and/or take on new projects needs to be balanced with the resources VLIZ has at its disposal (in terms of both financial and human capital).
2. Ensure further professionalising and strengthening of the organisation. VLIZ has experienced significant growth in recent years and as a result, invested in professionalising its HR policy. A point of attention for the future is maintaining the informal and personal character of VLIZ and the 'group feeling'. In addition, attention should be paid to risk management, whereby it is crucial to limit the reliance on project based finance for paying employees and/or funding core activities. Finally, the internal organisation needs to be revised if VLIZ's goals and mandate are changed.
3. Review the composition and operations of the board of directors and the scientific committee. Although their composition and operations have been reviewed for the period 2012-2016, it is good to repeat this exercise. Bearing in mind the potential expansion of the mandates, it is important to review the composition and operations of the Board of Directors and the Scientific Committee.
4. Strengthen the science-industry interface. VLIZ can improve its position in the Flemish (innovation) landscape by collaborating more intensively with players in the blue cluster and by meeting the growing demand for information on the sea and coast.

5. Enlarge the policy impact. See where it is possible to act more proactively towards policy makers and to make even better use of VLIZ's knowledge and expertise for policy making (e.g. in relation to blue growth and ocean literacy).
6. Focus the activities for education and for the general public, more specifically on young people, in collaboration with other stakeholders. In our view, it is valuable to actively focus the educational activities at primary school level. However, this requires close collaboration with other organisations active in this field, like the province of West Flanders.
7. Further open up VLIZ's valuable and unique library collection. Over the past few years, important steps have been made to open up the collection to a wider audience, for example through digitalisation. Making the collection more accessible (by means of digitalisation and connecting with other information systems) remains an important consideration for the coming period.



Contact:

Dialogic
Hooghiemstraplein 33-36
3514 AX Utrecht
Tel. +31 (0)30 215 05 80
Fax +31 (0)30 215 05 95
www.dialogic.nl

