

Claudia Neu

Citizens' Involvement – Success Factor for Rural Areas

All the biosphere reserves existing today in Germany are situated in rural areas. They are, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by demographic developments such as ageing, migration to cities and decline in birth rates. Throughout Germany, increasing support for the economy is usually proposed as the only solution to such demographic problems. That this approach falls short of the actual requirements is shown by a survey carried out in demographically successful villages in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

The rural areas in East Germany – above all in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania – have not had a good press in the past months. Articles on empty, albeit beautiful landscapes appeared again and again – landscapes with few women, children and well-qualified people, but rich in elderly citizens. These scenarios of decline were accompanied by descriptions of rural melancholy and social apathy.

Indeed weak economic structures and an accelerating demographic development combine in an unfortunate manner in rural areas. Jobs are rare, small and mini businesses in the industries and the services sector dominate. Even the economically successful agricultural businesses which used to provide hundreds of people with jobs can only offer a handful these days (Neu 2004). Unemployment numbers of 30 percent are not unusual in many districts in the North East.

The dismal economic situation of these regions causes many to 'flee' to West German federal states, above all young women between 18 and 25 years of age, as well as highly qualified people. Selective migration and birth deficits already indicate a loss in population of up to 35 percent in individual districts by 2020. Furthermore there is a distinct change in the age structure of the population. Even taking into account a forecasted slight increase in birth rate, the number of children and young people in nearly all Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania will decrease significantly, while the percentage of over-sixties will increase. In many districts this age group will grow to over 40 percent of the population (Ministry of Labour, Building and Development 2005). Economically underdeveloped

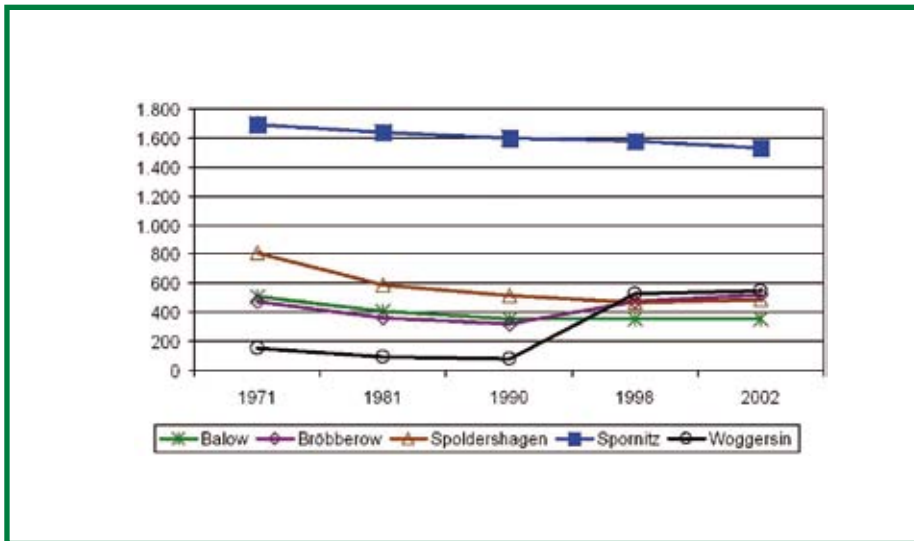


Villages taking part in the study

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rural regions will end up in a vicious circle of unemployment, migration and ageing, which, in turn, leads to empty treasuries and a cutback in infrastructure. The peripheral rural areas lose their socio-economic links to the urban centres even more (Barlösius/Neu 2007).

This trend is, without doubt, the case for many villages and communities in the most rural of areas. However, at the same time, we are observing municipalities, which resist the seemingly unrelenting trend of draining, shrinking and apathy. In these places activity and social commitment are the order of the day. In the following, these places are the focus of our attention. Why have they developed differently to other villages with similar conditions? What are their success factors?



Population development in the five villages

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Economy alone cannot explain the positive outcome

This question was dealt with in the study 'The active and social village' in summer 2005. The study was a joint effort of the then Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing of Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, the University of Rostock and the Institute of Higher Education Neubrandenburg. The goal was, on the basis of selected exemplary villages, to investigate how and why precisely these municipalities, being offered the same funding and support programmes as their neighbour communities, developed positively. Those involved in the study were: two villages in urban outskirts, Bröbberow (250 inhabitants) and Woggersin (530 inhabitants), two villages in the periphery, Divitz-Spoldershagen (490 inhabitants) and Balow (355 inhabitants) as well as the 'industrial village' Spornitz (1,051 inhabitants). The study was based on interviews carried out with inhabitants of these villages in 2005/2006 as well as on group discussions with central stakeholders.

Economic success cannot explain what makes these villages more overall successful than other places in Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania. The rate of unemployment lies between 13 (Woggersin) and 31 percent (Spoldershagen). With the exception of Spornitz there is hardly any established business of note. Agriculture – with the exception of Spornitz – does not play any role with regard to job opportunities in the villages either. Tourism, which was Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania's greatest hope, is as good as non-existent. At last, not all

places have had the advantage of farm or land consolidation or village rehabilitation.

The reason for their success lies in the cultural and social strengths of the villages. They succeed because of their active community. The community makes the places attractive for people to move to – above all for families with children – and gives reasons for staying, for example, for commuters. The five very different villages examined have succeeded in decreasing or even stopping the decline in population despite significant differences in the initial economic situation, in the location (suburbs vs. most rural areas) and in population numbers (between 355 and 1,051).

This relative demographic stability was achieved by an active population policy. This includes the designation of building land, the restoration of historical buildings but also the active fight to retain schools (as in Balow or Spornitz). Of vital importance is the tremendously diverse and vibrant community life in all places.

Associations and clubs – especially sport clubs and the auxiliary fire brigade, are responsible for the social life in the villages. In Balow over 80 percent of the 355 inhabitants take an active part in the local clubs. In Spoldershagen a traditional annual cultural highlight is the riding competition 'Tonnenabschlagen' at Whitsun, whereby riders knock a hanging barrel until it shatters. In Bröbberow and Woggersin the focus of club activities is on the maintenance of the historic village buildings.

In places where the inhabitants are involved in activities, there is always a core of players, who are involved in several clubs and who initiate numerous activities. It also appears to be crucial to have 'front men'/'front women'. These are often mayors who go out of their way to fill in all necessary forms, regardless of their complexity, in order to obtain funds. These representatives of community life have good contacts with the administration and know where to get help. Their distinct activities do not lead to less activity amongst the remaining inhabitants. All five villages are distinguished by a distinctive 'culture of individual responsibility'. The inhabitants have understood that the choice of social services depends on their own personal commitment.

These observations and the recipes of the five villages are not easy to transfer. Each community has its own set of historical conditions and other constellations of stakeholders leading to different forms of commitment. Thus the 'active and social village' cannot be planned nor ordered; nevertheless strengths can be identified in each community. Then all it takes is the realisation that to approach, motivate and involve others is for free. Local strengths and ideas may be turned into local economic services, which could lead to added value and job opportunities locally.

Nonetheless the limits of the citizens' contribution must be clearly defined. The withdrawal of the state from infrastructural activities on large parts of the territory already leads to large gaps in social structure, which the commitment of citizens cannot close. The current fashion to stress the importance of neighbourhood aid and solidarity in peripheral rural areas should be observed with great care.

Many success stories with regard to the villages mentioned above are unfortunately already endangered again due to the strained budgetary situation and the requirement of local co-financing. This all the more underlines the importance of stable institutional frameworks and the need for ideal as well as financial support in order to stabilise the widespread citizens' commitment. More commitment can be raised through:

- better public acknowledgement;
- closer cooperation between administration and local stakeholders;
- cross-village/community planning of infrastructure;
- consideration of social issues in the planning of public areas and
- the inclusion of local stakeholders in rural development projects.

"A culture of responsibility"

UNESCO Biosphere Reserve South-East Rügen

The South-East of the Baltic island of Rügen was designated by UNESCO in 1991. The entire diversity of Mecklenburg-Western Pomeranian coastline landscapes can be found in this area spanning 235 km². The Bodden, inland saltwater bay areas, with late ice-age island cores and bluffs, offer a multitude of habitats including: shallow waters with seaweed meadows and kelp forests and mudflats in sheltered bays. On this side of the coast there are beech forests, 'neglected grassland' and salt marshes. The wide salt reed banks of the inland saltwater bays offer an ideal breeding territory for waterbirds.

The project 'Job-Motor Biosphere' was founded in 1999; its objective is to reduce the high unemployment in the area by supporting start-up companies. The role model is the Job-Motor of the Schaalsee biosphere reserve (featured in this journal). More than one hundred participants were supported through individual and group coaching over a number of weeks as well as during regular meetings of working groups. Start-up companies were founded in branches such as

tourism, IT-services, crafts and culture. One example of a start-up company is 'Seeadler Touring' which organises package tours for young tourists such as sea-kayak excursions and sailing trips. In collaboration with the biosphere reserve a network of businesses aiming at sustainability in their operations was created. In addition, the 'Junior Job-

Motor Biosphere' is targeted at young people with the aim of preventing their emigration, introducing business studies to schools as an optional subject.

Further information:
<http://www.biosphaerenreservat-suedostruegen.de>

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Supporting citizens' commitment

Investment in the social and cultural infrastructure must enable citizens to continue to act on their own responsibility and to continue cooperative relationships, thus forming a functioning civil society.

The results of our study disclose that migration from rural communities and cultural decline of the countryside is not an inevitable fate. Through their commitment, citizens do not only create contacts, leisure time activities and culture, but also identity and a quality of life, which, in turn, make their communities attractive and liveable – for new citizens as well.

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Spring market at the Upper Lausitz Heath and Pond Landscape Biosphere Reserve

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