

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE  
TERRITORIAL AGENDA 2030

# *Joining Forces for Rural Areas*

Impulses for cooperative regional  
development in Germany and Europe



Federal Ministry  
for Housing, Urban Development  
and Building





Dear readers,

When the pilot action was planned in 2020, the focus was on structurally weak regions. This was in line with the focus of the Territorial Agenda 2030 for a Just Europe and our national policy for equal living conditions.

During the workshops with the partner regions, it became increasingly clear that the stamp of a lagging region can also lead to a negative spiral. If people find the region unattractive, they move away from it, others do not move there at all.

Global trends, economic developments and demographic change do indeed pose challenges to rural regions time and again.

However, rural areas also have great potential to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances. The key lies in resilience. Activating this potential is all the more successful if it is also associated with a positive change in the self-image and narrative from “lagging” to “proactive” regions.

For structurally weak regions, two success factors emerge as particularly promising: long-term inter-municipal cooperation and the bundling of competences. They help to make optimal use of limited resources.

In addition to the pilot action “A future for lagging regions”, other pilot actions have been initiated. They are intended to put the Territorial Agenda 2030 into practice and inspire new activities. Two aspects are particularly important:

1. cooperation with regional and local partners. Because local people know best what they need.
2. the spatially integrated perspective: it is essential not to look at places and sectoral policies in isolation. “No one is an island” also applies to them. A spatial and cross-sectoral perspective is complex, but ultimately leads to better results.

The approaches to action and lessons learnt presented in this outcome report are, in my view, a great treasure chest. I am happy if you help yourselves generously from it.

I wish you an insightful read and many inspirations on which contributions proactive rural regions deliver for a good life.

Yours

Klara Geywitz  
Federal Minister for Housing, Urban Development and Building

# Summary

*The Territorial Agenda 2030 was adopted on 1 December 2020 under the German EU Council Presidency as a central guiding document for European spatial development. In order to implement its goals and to establish a practical reference, thematic pilot actions were launched.*

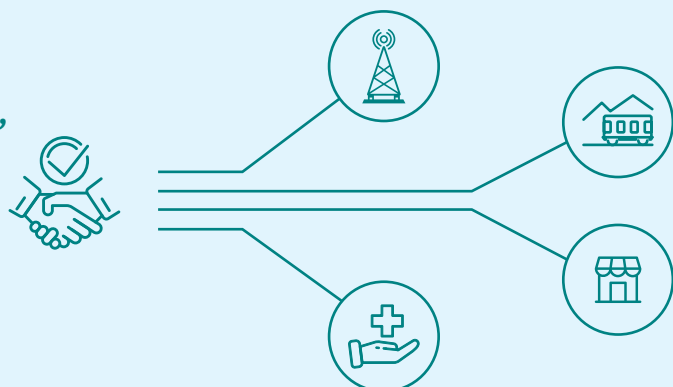
Under the leadership of the German Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building (BMWSB) and the German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), the pilot action “A future for lagging regions” was implemented, which considered approaches to securing services of general interest in rural regions. The partner regions worked on the sub-areas of digitalisation, mobility, health and local amenities, among others.

Due to the small-scale community structures and the increasing complexity of tasks related to services of general interest, smaller communities in

particular rapidly reach the limits of their capacities. Rural regions that have developed structural deficits due to their location or socioeconomic and demographic transformation processes are often described as “structurally weak” or “disadvantaged”. In some cases, this implicitly suggests a limited scope for action and passive acceptance of a downward spiral. This narrative is refuted by many local processes and initiatives and is therefore shown to be inaccurate and outdated. Rural regions in the pilot action and beyond act as proactive regions that, despite limited resources, are able to progress by means of expertise, cooperation and commitment.

## Pilot action “A future for lagging regions”

Approaches to securing services  
of general interest in rural regions





*The results of the pilot action include a variety of approaches, examples and measures that illustrate the contributions made to the quality of life by proactive rural regions.*

The pilot action shows the positive leverage effects that the adaptation of local structures and processes can deliver. For example, structural inter-municipal cooperation helps municipalities to use capacities more efficiently and to develop cross-local solutions, thus forming an important pillar for securing services of general interest. With the help of a cross-municipal approach, many public tasks and services can be fulfilled more effectively for the citizens. Active interdepartmental and interagency coordination in the administrations can greatly facilitate the work of local initiatives, from which new services of general interest can evolve. Low-threshold measures can also have a great leverage effect: networking and participation formats form the basis for developing strategic concepts and guiding principles at the local level and for actively bringing the public sector and partners from both the private sector and the local population into dialogue with each other.

In order to support cooperative processes more effectively, it is also necessary to improve financial incentives and administrative, strategic and planning framework conditions at the national and regional level. To this end, the pilot action has brought together practical approaches and examples, which are presented in this publication. In addition to financing investment measures, funding programmes should also focus more on process innovation in rural regions and support cooperation efforts in the municipalities so that they can continue to function effectively.

The project under German leadership is one of seven pilot actions, each focusing on different topics of the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030). In order to further implement the TA2030, a permanent programmatic anchoring as well as a clear political commitment of all participating states and the European Commission is needed. Directly linking the territorially relevant political objective 5 “a Europe closer to citizens” of the EU Structural Funds with the TA2030 can provide a starting point, as can the earmarking of a certain percentage of the EU Structural Funds for territorial issues (“spatial dimension”).



This publication is also available in German with the title “Gemeinsam für den ländlichen Raum – Impulse für eine kooperative Regionalentwicklung in Deutschland und Europa”.

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An aerial photograph of a European village. In the foreground, a wide river flows along a gravelly bank. Beyond the river is a large, dry, yellowish-brown field with several small trees and hay bales. To the left of this field is a green grassy area with a small playground and a building. In the center, a cluster of houses with red-tiled roofs is situated next to a railway line. The background shows rolling green hills and more houses under a clear sky.

# *The Territorial Agenda 2030:*

## *A vision for a good life in all regions of Europe*

*Global economic and societal trends are constantly triggering structural transformation processes at a regional level.*

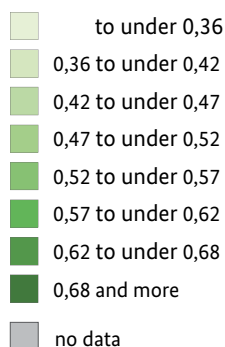
Changing manufacturing and production processes, digitalisation or the shift in energy production from fossil fuels to renewables have an impact on rural areas. Depending on the regional and socioeconomic structures, rural regions can benefit from new development trends and be economically attractive locations. This promotes the inflow of new people. Other rural regions face pressure and have to undergo structural transformation processes in order to adapt. Especially in peripheral areas, global trends often coincide with negative demographic factors. Shops close, buses rarely run, doctors' practices are far away, there is a lack of businesses and jobs, young people are leaving. Therefore, additional measures must be taken to keep people in their regions and give them a perspective to stay. This has not always been successful in the past, and the feeling of some people being "left behind" is spreading in many regions of Europe.

## *Compass for European spatial development*



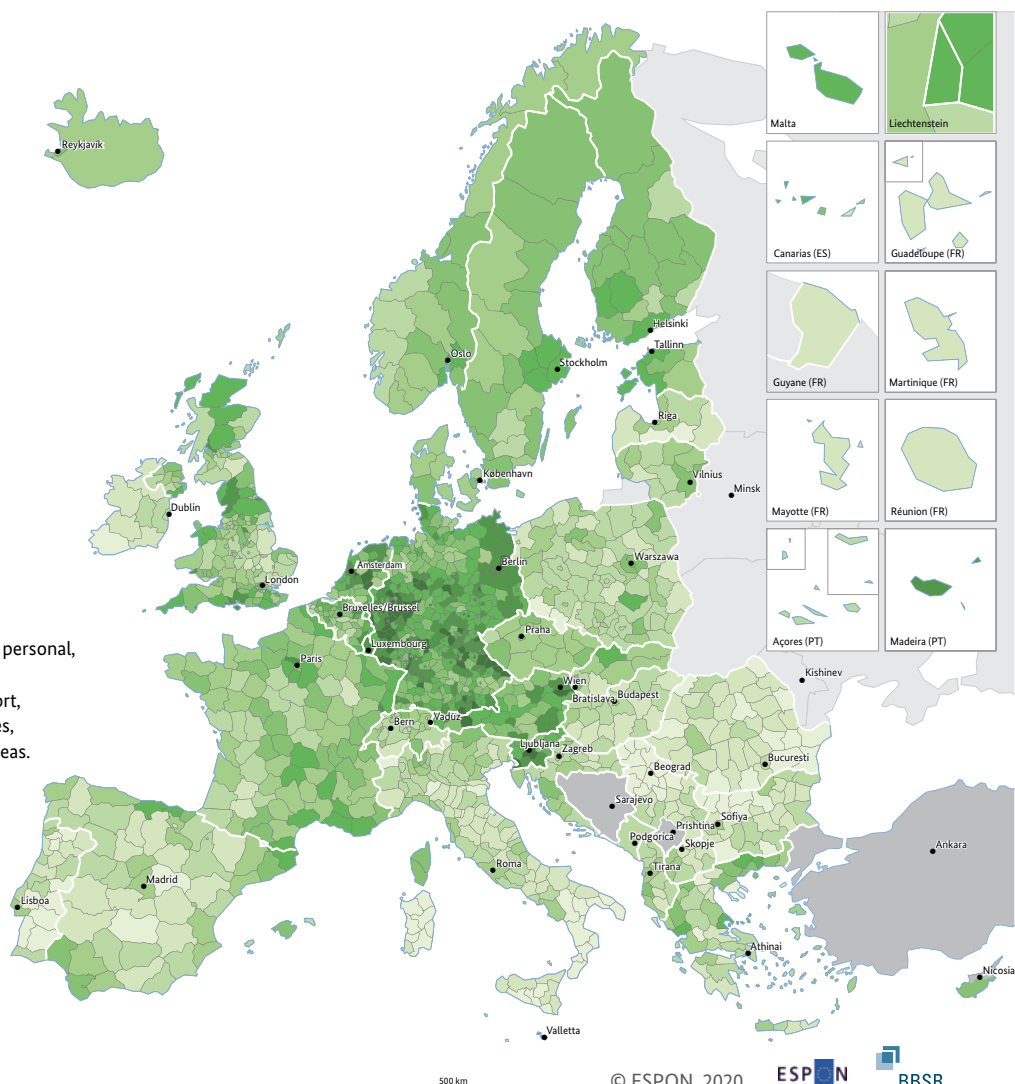
The Territorial Agenda 2030 that was adopted on 1 December 2020 under the German EU Council Presidency at the informal meeting of Ministers for spatial planning, territorial development and territorial cohesion provides a guiding framework document and a thematic compass for European spatial development. It addresses the outlined challenges in depth and formulates the overarching guiding principle of seeking to enable all regions and places in Europe to have a positive outlook for the future.

## Good Life Enablers Index\*



\*The good life enablers index includes the following personal, socio-economic ecological spheres: housing and basic utilities, health, education, transport, digital connectivity, work, consumption, public spaces, cultural assets, green infrastructure and protected areas. The detailed composition of the indicators can be found in the annex.

Regional level: NUTS 3 (2016)  
Origin of data: Eurostat, ESPON, EU-SPI European Regional Database, Eurobarometer, EEA, 2020;  
EuroGeographics for the administrative boundaries



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BBSR

Atlas of the Territorial Agenda 2030: Quality of life index in European regions  
[www.atlasta2030.eu](http://www.atlasta2030.eu)

The sufficient availability of services of general interest is the basis for a high quality of life. This, however, varies greatly from region to region across Europe (see figure above). In order to ensure good prospects for all regions, it is necessary to initiate structural adjustments to the provision of services of general interest at the local level. Through active cooperation with regional and lo-

cal partners, place-based strategies can be created, adapted and implemented. Thanks to the possibilities of digitalisation, it is possible to rethink and reorganise mobility, health care, education and local services. We can derive practical examples and recommendations for action from the thematic pilot actions implemented within the framework of the Territorial Agenda.

## *Future prospects for rural areas: The goals of the pilot action*

In order to implement the goals of the Territorial Agenda 2030 and to interlink them more closely with practice, the pilot action “A future for lagging regions” was launched on the initiative of the German Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building (BMWSB) in cooperation with the German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR). Over a period of three years, the Walgau region in Austria, the Grand Est region in France, the Alentejo region in Portugal, as well as the two districts of Görlitz and Schleswig-Flensburg and the Rostock planning region in Germany participated in the pilot action as partners.

The pilot action focused on the exchange of cooperative and activating measures at the regional and local level for the long-term improvement of services of general interest in rural and peripheral areas. This allows approaches that increase the equality of living conditions of regions across Europe to be identified. The participating regions are characterised by demographic changes and low population density. Some of the regions are also going through profound processes of economic transformation.

Through a joint transnational and multi-level dialogue between European institutions, member states, regions and municipalities, a discourse on the following approaches to cooperative regional development was successfully established:

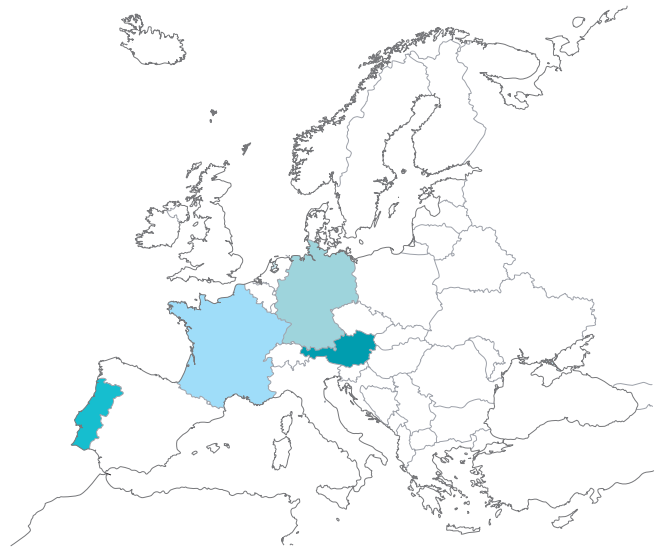
- Understanding national policy approaches for rural regions
- Building strategic local communities of responsibility
- Using digitalisation as an opportunity
- Shaping rural mobility together

In parallel, the implementation of regional measures was promoted in the three German partner regions through model projects of spatial development (MORO). The measures ranged from the analysis of central structures and services of general interest to the promotion of informal cooperation structures and networks to support the development of digital services and platforms. An important concern was to promote interdisciplinary dialogue in order to make the results and findings of the pilot action usable for higher-level policies, plans and programmes.

“Inter-municipal cooperation is at the core of our activities. A common strategy and knowledge base about existing and future cooperation – such as in the areas of childcare, care and support for the elderly, financial management, archives, culture and public relations – constitutes an important basis for our collaborative work. At the same time, involving all relevant stakeholders is a major challenge.”

Florian Kasseroler,  
Chairman, Regio Im Walgau

## Understanding national policy approaches for rural regions



*In Europe, the distribution of responsibilities and competences in planning and governance processes is very heterogeneous. However, regardless of whether a centralised or federal state system, national policies, programmes and initiatives play an important role. They are called upon to create incentives for change in local governance processes, to support bottom-up initiatives and to contribute to the empowerment of local stakeholders who actively shape change. In this respect, an intertwined and well-coordinated multi-level governance system with national, regional and municipal measures is a cornerstone for transformative processes.*

### France: Decentralisation and contracts between national and regional administrations



In France, there have been shifts from a very centralised administration to a more decentralised system. Although responsibilities for regional development are mainly allocated at the regional level, the state remains very present due to its role in the coordination of sectoral services of the national ministries. This coordination is mainly done through multi-level and long-term

contracts between national and regional administrations, which can cover multiple sectoral strategies. The objective is to succeed in steering national sectoral policies in a way that corresponds to regional realities. In recent years, more emphasis has also been placed on participation and dialogue processes, along with technical support for analysis and cooperation at the inter-municipal level. In order to be implemented successfully, this approach requires adequate capacities at the local level, which have to be promoted and built up accordingly.



### **Austria: Strengthening multi-level governance through a mediating role of the national level**

In Austria, the national level aims to empower stakeholders and institutions at the regional and local level to act, to strengthen capacities in the federal context, and to establish inter-municipal partnerships at the local level. Central national funding programmes, for example on climate adaptation, increasingly also promote the development of local stakeholder structures in order to be able to implement strategic goals. Within the framework of the National Spatial Development Concept, partnerships were established many years ago that link various stakeholders from administration, science and economy and bring them together in dialogue formats. In this approach too, the national level acts primarily as a mediator to stimulate transformation processes and simultaneously anchor them on a wider scale.

### **Portugal: Promoting interaction between levels of government and stakeholders**



Portugal focuses particularly on implementing the objectives of the European Rural Pact and promoting interaction between levels of government and stakeholders for rural development. Within the framework of the National Spatial Policy Programme, there is a cross-sectoral working platform involving all ministries responsible for model strategies for structurally weak regions. The aim is to develop a long-term vision for rural regions and a lasting commitment of individual sectors in line with place-based concepts. The National Spatial Policy Programme also foresees a new initiative for an innovative spatial planning process involving lo-

cal and regional stakeholders who contribute to the process with their expertise. The focus is on socioeconomic issues, with the aim of addressing the challenges of structurally weak regions. Multi-level governance, which emphasises the role of capacity-building in municipalities, enables the resilience of rural regions to be strengthened.

### **Germany: Commission for Equal Living Conditions**



In order to address the challenge of regional inequalities, the German Federal Government established the Commission for Equal Living Conditions in 2018. The aim was to define measures that contribute to the establishment of equivalent living conditions. All federal ministries as well as some regional and local stakeholders were represented in the commission. Its results included a comprehensive data pool of structural and spatial data that serves as an important foundation for work. In addition, a nationwide support system for structurally weak regions and a legal instrument to ensure equivalent living conditions were developed. Alongside a catalogue of agreed goals and individual measures, the Commission succeeded in achieving greater recognition of effective multi-level governance and cross-sectoral cooperation. Even after the end of the Commission's work, its recommendations continue to feed into policy discussions and the development of funding programmes. The "Better Promote" project, for example, developed approaches for a stronger service orientation in regional funding programmes. The aim was to examine how practitioners implementing ideas in rural and structurally weak areas can best be supported in the utilisation of funding offers. The project pursued an integrated approach that shed light on cooperation across departments, levels and institutions.

## *Diverse rural regions: The proactive partnership of the pilot action*

### **New impulses for services of general interest through structured dialogues in the district of Görlitz (Germany)**

The model region of Görlitz is a rural region in eastern Germany divided into smaller areas. It comprises local centres, but also sparsely populated smaller communities in peripheral locations. Many of the challenges of the district are therefore related to ensuring the provision of public

services in fields such as mobility, local amenities, accessibility and rural logistics. In order to better manage these tasks, the district relies on structured dialogues with local citizens and cooperative processes with the municipalities. In the pilot action, cooperative processes were established in the municipality of Boxberg, which is characterised by a large spatial expanse and many small districts. As a result, local initiatives in the fields of mobility and local amenities were promoted through workshops, expert studies and active networking. This was supported by the establishment of a new competence centre in the district office in Görlitz, where work is carried out across departments and disciplines. The working methods of the competence centre and the underlying self-conception of the district as an active coordinator of cooperative district development were tested and institutionalised during the implementation of the pilot action.



Findlingspark Nochten in the district of Görlitz



Walgau region

### **Inter-municipal cooperation as an instrument for joint development in the Walgau region (Austria)**

The Walgau region is an economically solid region in the west of Austria, characterised by a heterogeneous settlement structure and featuring industrial areas as well as small and sometimes peripheral village structures. In order to strengthen the inter-municipal cooperation of the municipalities in Walgau, the association *Regio Im Walgau* was founded in 2011. Today, the *Regio* comprises 14 municipalities. The cooperation is based on a shared guiding principle and a regional development concept, and at the same time goes far beyond this. The different fields of

cooperation range from joint socio-spatial planning to digital management, citizen services and spatial and transport planning. Depending on the topic and the needs, the inter-municipal alliances always come together in new constellations, develop joint strategies, carry out concrete analyses for cooperation needs, support these with projects and orient themselves to common guidelines for cooperation. Based on the jointly developed cooperation plans, measures are also implemented with financial support from the state administration. The common goal is to initiate active participation between stakeholders and to secure municipal services of general interest for a high quality of life for all generations.



Grand Est region

**“Third places” and digitalisation: Strengthening the sense of community and digital provision in the Grand Est region (France)**

The Grand Est region is a large region in the east of France with mostly small settlements. In the past, the socioeconomic differences between rural and urban areas grew noticeably. This is characterised by a thinning out of services of general interest and a loss of attractiveness of rural areas. On the basis of partnership agreements between the region, ministries and municipalities, targeted support initiatives have therefore been launched for small sub-areas, which are also intended to initiate inter-municipal cooperation. The region is particularly active in the field of digitalisation. Since for many rural areas a pri-

vate-sector supply of broadband networks is not viable, the region supports the development of the technical infrastructure with public funds. In addition, the Grand Est region offers active support for small communities in digitalisation and promotes model projects to increase the digital and physical accessibility of rural areas. In order to strengthen people’s sense of community in rural communities, to develop ideas and to activate the potential for action of local stakeholders, the Grand Est region also supports a network for the establishment of so-called “third places” of community life. In this context, national and regional funding function together by actively supporting and promoting the visibility of the network and the interlinking of the stakeholders at the regional level.

### Prospects for lower-order centres and rural areas in the Rostock planning region (Germany)

The Rostock planning region in northern Germany includes structurally weak regions as well as strong growth centres such as the Hanseatic City of Rostock. The focus in the pilot action was on forecasting the development of population and housing demand in the planning region and a comprehensive evaluation of the lower-order centres, the results of which are included in the follow-up of the Regional Spatial Planning Programme. It became apparent that pure economic and population figures are no longer sufficient as a basis for determining lower-order centres in rural areas. Rather, it must also be identified which functions and tasks the lower-order cen-

tres assume for their respective service areas. Another focus was the support of inter-communal exchange and the introduction of digital applications in the town of Krakow am See as part of a local model project financed by funds from the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Here it became clear how important it is to have committed and convinced people on the ground in order to successfully implement digitalisation projects in rural areas. Throughout the duration of the pilot project, there was also a regular exchange with the state initiative “Ländliche GestaltungsRäume” (Rural Design Spaces), which provides intensive support and assistance for innovative model solutions in the field of services of general interest.

Rostock region



### Multi-level governance for education and digitalisation in the Alentejo region (Portugal)

The Alentejo region in southern Portugal is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the country. A particular challenge for the region is demographic change, with a noticeable population decline in rural communities. Therefore, a central concern of the region is to develop projects and initiatives that offer new perspectives, especially for the younger population. One focus is the implementation of a coherent digital agenda for the region. This includes modernising and digitalising the local and regional public administration, ensuring basic digital skills of employees and the local population, and supporting the local and regional economy in digitalisation. Another fo-

cus is put on the field of education to ensure that equal educational opportunities are also guaranteed in sparsely populated and shrinking areas. Within the framework of an OECD study, concrete recommendations for action were developed and introduced into the pilot action. Identified deficits, for example in the area of digital skills and the mobility and accommodation of pupils, are to be compensated for through cross-municipal cooperation concepts. However, the respective areas of responsibility have so far been located at different administrative levels. To ensure that individual measures and initiatives can nevertheless be implemented effectively, good interaction between the different administrative levels is of great importance.



Alentejo region

“Alentejo’s digital agenda is a strategic mission for the development of the digital and technological ecosystem of society and companies as a lever for regional development in the territory, integrated in a sustainable way, in symbiosis with the traditions, cultural and natural heritage that characterises Alentejo.”

Carmen Carvalheira,  
Vice President CCDR Alentejo,  
Portugal



Schleswig municipality in the district of Schleswig-Flensburg

### **New approaches in health care and mobility in the district of Schleswig-Flensburg (Germany)**

As part of the pilot action, the district of Schleswig-Flensburg in the north of Germany prepared a study on the health care situation which, based on an analysis of accessibility and the availability of health care services, allows for the early and prospective identification of gaps in health care provision. Building on this, an impulse paper on viable and future-oriented health care in the district was developed, which demonstrates the possibilities for action – also including digital offers – in order to ensure long-term and high-quality health care in the future. The aim of both papers is to support the discussions

of stakeholders in the health sector from the perspective of regional development by providing tailor-made decision-making aids and to initiate further action steps and implementation projects – such as the creation of a “Gesundheitskiosk” (health kiosk) – as a new type of health and social infrastructure that could improve care in sparsely populated areas. Another focus of the activities was the development of a foundation for a mobility portal that enables intermodal journey-planning and also contains information on local offers and services. One key challenge is the integration of higher-level platforms and information services to ensure that the entire travel chain from urban centres to rural areas can be reliably covered.

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*Rural regions  
are shaping  
their future*

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*Developments in demographic change and structural change processes in rural areas require the flexible adaptation of local steering and supply structures. This adaptation is successful if it is associated with a positive change in the self-conception of “disadvantaged” or “disconnected” regions towards proactive regions. The term “proactive region” was coined by Jens Südekum and is intended to express that structurally weak and rural areas have transformative potentials that need to be activated.*

The ability to transform rural areas corresponds to the idea of a “resilient” development of regions. Resilience can be understood in the sense of a stable, permanent capacity to adapt in order to secure the status quo in the long term. In its original sense, the term describes robustness and resilience to the effects of external and crisis events. In addition to sudden disruptive events, the resilience approach also includes long-term transformative processes, for example in connection with regionally pronounced demographic change or the economic restructuring of entire regions. The resilience discussion can therefore also facilitate new ways of thinking in order to actively shape transformation processes in structurally weak rural regions beyond traditional development models.



#### RESILIENCE

In addition to robustness to disruptive events, the resilience approach also includes long-term transformative processes, for example in connection with a regionally significant demographic change or the economic restructuring of entire regions.

Developing flexible and adaptable concepts for services of general interest

In order to be able to maintain attractive services of general interest in the long term, it is crucial that models and concepts in planning and administration flexibly take local needs and stakeholders into account.

Local responsibility communities are important stakeholders in the provision of services of general interest in rural areas. Such communities can activate the transformative power of rural regions through dynamic, proactive action and at the same time contribute to the creation of a positive community feeling. In this context, the public sector must continue to bear responsibility for central areas of services of general interest to be able to fulfil its steering and control function. Municipalities, districts and regions can support the development of communities of responsibility through facilitation, networking and promotion.

Structured inter-municipal cooperation is also a vital success factor in structurally weak and sparsely populated regions. By bundling capacities through inter-municipal alliances, involving specialised agencies, non-profit associations and local actor groups from the private sector and civil society, and through the support of digital processes, it is possible to efficiently design functioning and needs-based systems of services of general interest.

In order to enable successful communities of responsibility and cooperation, improving the allocation of competences in the subsidiarity structure can be an important starting point. Decentralised responsibilities can increase the accuracy of services with regard to local needs. At the same time, it may be necessary to adapt or renew local and regional cooperation processes.

*In the following section, selected fields of action are presented that were dealt with in depth in the pilot action “A future for lagging regions” and that offer impulses for cooperative regional development.*

## *Taking action: Building strategic local communities of responsibility*



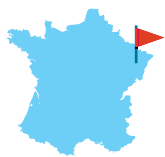
One of the major challenges of all regions involved in the pilot action is establishing working structures to compensate for capacity and competence bottlenecks, to build more efficient administrative structures, and at the same time to successfully bring together different groups of stakeholders from the private sector and civil society. The establishment of local and regional communities of responsibility, coordinated and initiated by public stakeholders, is one of the key tasks for developing sustainable and resilient rural areas.

The development of integrated strategy and planning concepts requires active coordination of different sectoral departments and interest groups. Furthermore, goal-oriented processes of active steering are needed to define concrete problem areas and develop strategies that address local challenges.

## *Joint strategy and planning processes*



The formulation of integrated strategy and planning concepts is a fundamental instrument for defining location-specific development goals within the framework of spatial development. In addition to formal planning procedures, informal strategy processes enable the depiction of particular challenges in the provision of public services for sub-areas or specific target groups. These include regional development concepts, inter-municipal partnerships, municipal alliances, informal guiding principles and local networks. A key factor here is the autonomous commitment of the local and regional stakeholders involved. It is important to increase the awareness of challenges among the local population and institutions and to mobilise them for common solutions, whilst also adapting administrative and working structures. Communities capable of action in structurally weak regions must be actively promoted and empowered.



### Grand Est region: Regional support for the “third places” concept

A promising and low-threshold approach to local community-building is the concept of “third places”, first introduced by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg in the late 1980s. The concept comprises three categories of spaces. The first place is residential in character and refers to a person’s home. The second place is the workplace, where a person spends a large part of his or her life. The “third place”, on the other hand, focuses on interactions with other people and community-building. These places are understood as anchors of community life. The following basic requirements must be considered:

- In order to enable equal accessibility and use of a “third place”, it should be a neutral and easily reachable place.
- A “third place” must have a low accessibility threshold, be non-hierarchical and open to all levels of society, and contribute to the reduction of social disparities.



Map of the “third places” in the Grand Est region

“Third Places enable the development of new working methods and local activities, and help to build a foundation of trust. The Grand Est region supports the development of Third Places to better respond to the different challenges and needs on the ground.”

Denise Buhl,  
Vice-President of the Grand Est Region,  
Commission of Mountains, Rurality and  
Local Heritage

- The concept of “third places” is a complementary link to reach people who cannot be reached through institutionalised clubs or associations.

“Third places” can be set up in libraries, community spaces, parks or as temporary uses of vacant buildings. They offer space for citizens’ initiatives, projects, training or cultural activities and can be linked to local economic activities such as local crafts.



“Third places” event

This form of local networking is particularly important for sparsely populated rural areas with limited mobility services and a lack of public spaces. In France, the establishment of “third places” is supported by various national funding programmes. The Grand Est region has also recognised their importance. To promote the positive impulses for local community-building, the regional competence network Réseau des Tiers-Lieu was established to preserve and support “third places” with a specifically created label.

Thus, measures are complemented at the regional level so that national support programmes can have a greater impact.

In spring 2023, there were almost 60 “third places” in the Grand Est region, located in both urban and rural areas. Practical guides and the network support the exchange of practical experience and know-how on the long-term operation of “third places”.



### **Regio Im Walgau: Inter-communal cooperation and regional funding mechanisms**

Due to decentralised municipal structures and the increasing complexity of public services, smaller municipalities in particular rapidly reach the limits of their capacities. Many public services can be fulfilled more effectively with the help of a cross-municipal approach. Regio Im Walgau in Austria has been applying this successfully since 2011 with 14 municipalities. These are comprised of small village structures with a population of a few hundred people up to larger centres with up to 6,500 people. The administration is carried out by an association founded specifically for this purpose. In 2021, the 14 municipalities developed a joint cooperation plan that allows for different formats, legal forms and constellations depending on the issue. Thematically, Regio Im Walgau is very broadly oriented. The fields of cooperation range from public relations

work and securing municipal infrastructure to culture and childcare. The basis for the formulated goals is a regional development concept for Walgau. Cooperation is thus centred around a strategic process, which includes a needs analysis for new projects and cooperation formats.

The cooperation formats are financially supported by the federal state of Vorarlberg. The associated funding guidelines foresee basic funding for each Regio of 60,000 euros per year. In addition, there are specific additional grants for the participating municipalities. The prerequisite for funding is the development of joint concepts, the establishment of a competent regional management unit and the conclusion of a target agreement with the state of Vorarlberg. This is intended to strengthen regional cooperation between the participating municipalities and ensure the long-term viability of the funded region.



### **District of Görlitz: Competence centre for local initiatives and inter-municipal cooperation**

In the district of Görlitz, challenges related to the provision of services of general interest such as mobility, utility supply, accessibility and rural logistics have for many years been addressed within the framework of a structured dialogue with relevant community stakeholders. In order to better address the specific needs of municipalities and to further support local cooperation processes and structures of local engagement, a new competence centre was established within the district administration that encompasses an overarching division for structural development, economic development and international relations. It operates across all departments and bundles different responsibilities and powers. It is intended to serve as a central contact point for municipalities and stakeholders from the region to help implement projects and ideas from citizens and municipalities by providing the necessary expertise and thus improve services of general interest. The competence centre is an expression of the district's new self-conception as a coordinator and facilitator of district development. During the pilot project, the centre cooperated closely with the municipality of Boxberg and the association Perspektive Boxberg e.V.

The spectrum of new initiatives and ideas includes projects to improve the accessibility and availability of local facilities of general interest and supply, to secure local or regional value chains and to promote mobility and tourism. For this purpose, regular consultations were held with Perspektive Boxberg e.V., but also with specialised authorities, academic institutions, associations and other municipalities. The competence centre not only provides technical support, but also brings great benefits in terms of networking and visibility vis-à-vis local stakeholders.

“With the help of the cooperative and inter-municipal approach and the cross-border cooperation, even very rural municipalities such as the municipality of Boxberg were able to participate and develop solutions to concrete challenges. Through citizen participation and the support of experts, it was possible to define concrete problems in the provision of public services and mobility and to derive further steps for action.”

Stephan Meyer,  
District Administrator of the  
Görlitz district

Beyond the approaches presented here, the interaction between administrative levels and the cooperation with civil society and private-sector stakeholders were of central importance for all participating regions in the pilot action “A future for lagging regions”. Whether in the organisation of educational offers in the Alentejo region, the establishment of digital offers and platforms in

the Rostock planning region or the sustainable design of health care in the Schleswig-Flensburg district, the establishment of local and regional communities of responsibility coordinated and initiated by public stakeholders is one of the key tasks for a sustainable and resilient development of rural areas.

## Lessons learned:



- **Cooperation requires support:** The public sector has many ways to support cooperative activities at the local and regional level – from funding to organisational support.
- **Low-threshold measures also have a great leverage effect:** The provision of easily accessible places of encounter in line with the “third places” concept can effectively stimulate cooperation activities.
- **Inter-communal partnerships have a disburdening effect:** Especially in sparsely populated regions with capacity bottlenecks, inter-municipal cooperation helps municipalities to provide public services of high quality.
- **Integrated approaches enable citizen-centred administration:** The bundling of competences and networking activities is particularly helpful for local initiatives to increase their visibility and perceivability.

## *Taking action: Using digitalisation as an opportunity*

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In order to use digital services sensibly and to meet location-specific challenges and needs, it is necessary to develop integrated digital strategies. These, in turn, must be integrated into higher-level strategies and vision processes. Cooperative regional and supra-regional processes are essential in the area of digitalisation, also to avoid the formation of isolated local solutions that are not compatible with each other.

For rural and sparsely populated areas, realistic expectations of digital solutions are needed; they are not a panacea for structural deficits. Insufficient connectivity to centres or difficult socio-economic location factors cannot be made up for by digital services. The provision of nationwide high-bandwidth internet access is only one aspect of digitalisation. Many years of experience from urban development show that “smart cities” must be managed wisely. The same applies to the “smart” countryside – although approaches from urban development cannot simply be transferred to rural areas.



## *Digital services enable participation*

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Digital tools offer the possibility of enabling basic services of general interest at reasonable costs and independent of the local ties of providers, even in sparsely populated areas. Digital access to health services, the organisation of flexible mobility offers, access to educational offers for different age groups or also the strengthening of social cohesion through innovative communication platforms and online participation formats are just a few examples of how digital services can improve the quality of life in rural areas.

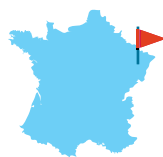
“The growing digitalisation in all areas of life offers new opportunities for rural areas. This can become a real laboratory for innovative infrastructures. Rapid developments also bring with them the need to update regional development and planning strategies.”

District Administrator Wolfgang Buschmann,  
Schleswig-Flensburg District



### Schleswig-Flensburg district: Smart city model project in the Süderbrarup office

An example of how a digital strategy can be set up and implemented in a sparsely populated area is offered by the Süderbrarup office in the district of Schleswig-Flensburg. It comprises 13 municipalities, is characterised by agriculture and tourism and, like many other rural municipalities, is strongly affected by demographic change. The digital strategy of the municipality was developed through a broad participation process with various formats on-site. It is oriented towards the needs of local and regional stakeholders and integrates local implementation expertise. The integrated approach to action comprises ten strategic thematic fields in which various projects are embedded, ranging from educational offers and software solutions, the establishment of a digital centre as a makerspace and Smart City Lab to the installation of a local on-demand bus system. All individual projects work towards the fulfilment of overarching goals. When developing solutions, explicit consideration was given to approaches that have already been successfully tested elsewhere and can be transferred to other municipalities in the future.



### Grand Est region: Regional impulses for the digitalisation of smaller municipalities

Smaller rural communities and municipalities with limited qualified labour can often be overwhelmed when it comes to digital transformations in the municipal administration and the provision of digital services. Accompaniment and coaching by higher-level initiatives or authorities provide important support in this regard. Active support for digital transformation in rural areas is offered by the Grand Est region in France. This region comprises about 10 per cent of all municipalities in France, many of which are located in rural areas. Deficits existed above all in the expansion of the digital infrastructure by private investors. The reason for this is the low density of households, which leads to comparatively high costs for infrastructure development.



Laying of fibre optic cable

However, in order to support digitalisation in rural areas as well, the region invested in the infrastructural development of fibre-optic networks using public funds, with up to 35 per cent of the total costs from state funds. Thus, already in 2019, a large proportion of the rural communities had a sufficiently large bandwidth.

In addition to the physical infrastructure, the Grand Est region has introduced support measures for local authorities and municipalities. With the aim of establishing a functioning digital municipal administration, selected pilot municipalities received basic assistance in the design, needs analysis and establishment of the municipalities' digital online services by the region. Citizen participation was an integral part of the process, for example via the offer of digital training measures. This helps ensure that digitalisation is an integrative process, even for smaller municipalities. However, in order for the region to become active, the municipality and its local initiatives must be committed and there is a need for initial concepts that they can build on.



### **The federal state of Vorarlberg: Digitalisation of the administration**

The Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities is an interest group in the federal state of Vorarlberg that interconnects 96 municipalities and performs various advisory and cooperation tasks. Together with the state administration, the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities has developed a strategy to advance the digitalisation of public administration across organisations and to stimulate inter-municipal cooperation. Key aspects of this strategy include a knowledge and data management concept and support for municipalities in setting up, procuring and maintaining their IT infrastructure.

At the same time, concepts for simplifying bureaucratic administrative processes are being developed and implemented to facilitate the handling and completion of administrative procedures in exchange with citizens. This is intended to prevent multiple entries of data and to facilitate the provision of administrative services

without the need for an application – while observing the rules of data protection. As a result of the joint digitalisation strategy, a service portal for citizens and a cross-organisational intranet platform were established. Further inter-communal cooperation was also initiated in this way, for example in the areas of financial management and personnel administration.

The example of Vorarlberg shows that in particular for smaller administrations, task support by intermediary bodies such as municipal associations can help to drive innovation – and as a result, new capacities for important citizen services can be created, such as for community work and the promotion of volunteering.

## Lessons learned:



- **Clear goals enable strategic action:** Before implementing digital measures, it should be clarified exactly which needs are to be addressed. Which digital offers already exist, where is there a need for optimisation? Where are deficits, and what alternatives and possibilities for action are there to eliminate them?
- **Take functional interdependencies into account, avoid isolated solutions:** Digital solutions must reflect the everyday realities of people's lives on the ground. If these end at administrative borders, they can become uninteresting for users.
- **Forge new alliances and collaborations:** The implementation of digital strategies does not end at institutional and administrative borders – local stakeholders and users must work together to form digital communities of responsibility.
- **Understand digitalisation as a joint learning process:** Digital tools change many procedures and processes and open up opportunities for new cooperation. If local stakeholders and decision-makers, civil society stakeholders and users work closely together and learn from each other, the benefits of digitalisation can be further increased.

## *Taking action: Shaping rural mobility together*

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Mobility implies access to work, to school and educational institutions, to daily utilities and social services, to travel and leisure opportunities, to social contacts and to information. It therefore plays a crucial role in social participation and interaction. The development of new, long-term sustainable mobility structures for all citizens is an important task for local and regional authorities.

Municipal mobility management can help to coordinate and balance the requirements and interests of different stakeholders. It can help to form new alliances for accessibility and mobility in rural areas and promote cooperation between public and civil-society stakeholders. Through such cooperation and networks, synergy effects can be used meaningfully, and new and perhaps unusual partnerships – taking into account local contexts – can bring about sustainable change.

## *The challenge of small settlement structures*

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The provision of mobility poses great challenges for many regions in rural areas. Due to decentralised settlement structures and low population density, demand is often insufficient to realise high-quality local public transport services. The challenge is to develop economically viable and demand-oriented public mobility services. Population decline and ageing simultaneously lead to further centralisation of services and infrastructures. Consequently, the dependence on private cars is very high – which is also the result of the mobility paradigm of the past decades that has been oriented towards individual mobility and the development of a corresponding (road) infrastructure.

### Future-oriented mobility models are demand-oriented

Local public transport with fixed routes and timetables, which is often geared towards school transport, often does not meet the mobility needs of people in rural regions. Planning for new services must be oriented towards the actual requirements of the people and take into account the specific needs of different social groups such as older people, children and young people.

There are already a variety of solutions for organising transport in rural areas with low demand that can complement and in some cases even replace classic public transport services. However, successfully established mobility models in one region are not automatically successful in other regions.

In order to create suitable offers, it is important to understand what concerns, if any, exist locally. Sometimes the reasons are not obvious at first glance – older people may be reluctant to request a bus for a personal journey, for others the car may still be the better choice after weighing up individual advantages and disadvantages. Negative reports also help to find out whether people's needs may be misunderstood, or whether

additional push factors, such as fewer or more expensive parking spaces, are needed alongside pull factors to bring about lasting change in mobility behaviour.

### On-demand buses as flexible mobility models

In the Rostock district, in the Schleswig-Flensburg district and in the Alentejo region, experience is already being gained with different on-demand systems with the “Rufbus Rubi”, the “Smartes DorfSHUTTLE” and “Transporte a Pedido”, where individual journeys with minibuses can be requested.

One advantage of such services compared to line- and timetable-based services can be that part of the costs are only incurred when the service is actually used. However, a minimum number of journeys is necessary to establish a viable system.

One example is the “Bürgerbus Boxberg” in the district of Görlitz, which in a pilot phase served a fixed route between all 18 districts of the municipality and the nearest railway stations. It operated once a week as a supplement to the regular bus service with four additional bus routes and two minibuses, free of charge for passengers. The experiences from the pilot phase have been used to launch follow-up projects for local mobility services.



Smartes DorfSHUTTLE in the Schleswig-Flensburg district



### Alentejo region: On-demand service in a particularly sparsely populated region

The Alentejo region is a particularly sparsely populated area where transport needs cannot be efficiently met by regular public transport services with fixed timetables and routes. The on-demand service “Transporte a Pedido” therefore complements transport services where they are not available or insufficient.

The travel costs are shared between the municipalities and the users. In a pilot phase involving eight municipalities, the concept builds on two main components: an electronic platform for administration and route planning and a telephone registration and reservation service. The electronic platform has an area with free access – the “front office” – and an area with restricted access – the “back office”. Through the back office, municipalities can manage routes, stops, timetables and fares as well as monitor usage. This allows them to collect data on the number of journeys, total kilometres and total costs. The front office gives the public access to information on routes, stops, timetables and fares, booking modalities, frequently asked questions and other information. Via the telephone registration and reservation service, which is the only booking option in the pilot phase, all booking requests are registered, checked and confirmed.

### Designing mobility hubs as attractive public spaces

The state of Vorarlberg relies on design, recognisability and continuity to increase the attractiveness of public transport – in particular bus services – and to improve the accessibility of the offers. A common design language was developed for the region to increase identification and simplify orientation. The intuitive guidance system consists of a clear colour design for city buses and interregional bus routes, which was also transferred to the design of bus stops and timetables. This makes it very easy for both locals and guests to recognise which bus line they need to use to reach their destination.

An important image factor is also the design of stations and stops as access and transfer points for public transport. For example, in the state of Vorarlberg, mobility hubs at important rural railway stations, which form the backbone of the mobility system, are designed as high-quality public spaces. Aspects of settlement development and the different types of mobility are considered in conjunction with each other with the aim of motivating people to switch from their cars to other means of transport. Stations and stops thus become appealing public places where people feel comfortable.

Train station design in Feldkirch, Vorarlberg



Vorarlberg public transport network, city bus and regional bus



RadelnohneAlter  
rickshaw ride



### Alternative mobility through civic engagement

In Regio Im Walgau, the concept of “cycling at any age” has been implemented. Here, older people can take advantage of a free mobility and excursion service by being carried on cargo bikes or rickshaws. The service is organised by a network of volunteers, and the bikes can also be rented for private trips. Here, too, a targeted approach and

communication with the target group was necessary to convince them to use the offer. Especially in the rural areas of the region, the service has become very popular, and new friendships and networks have been formed across generations. In addition to fulfilling mobility needs, older and less mobile people can experience nature again and regain a great deal of quality of life.

## Lessons learned:



- **Match mobility offers to mobility needs:** Different social groups have different mobility needs. It is worthwhile taking a close look when developing new mobility offers and entering into a close dialogue and exchange with users.
- **Exploit the possibilities of digitalisation:** Sustainable mobility services in rural areas are demand-driven, digital, interconnected and data-driven. Mobile phone data can support strategic mobility planning and help to better understand mobility patterns.
- **Thinking mobility and spatial development in conjunction:** Integrated approaches to mobility and settlement development support the use of public transport services, as well as high-quality planning of public spaces.
- **Patience and stamina are important:** New mobility offers need time to be accepted. They must be supported by active communication and low-threshold opportunities for entry – especially if the aim is to also activate new user groups.

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a diverse group of people holding their hands together in a circle. The hands are the central focus, stacked on top of each other. In the background, the faces of several individuals are visible, looking down towards the hands. One person in the bottom right is smiling broadly. The lighting is bright and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is positive and collaborative.

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# *Recommendations for cooperative regional develop- ment*

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Rural regions that have developed structural deficits due to their location or socioeconomic and demographic transformation processes are often described as “structurally weak” or “disadvantaged”. In some cases, this implicitly suggests a limited scope for action and a passive acceptance of the downward spiral. This narrative is refuted by many local processes and initiatives and is therefore shown to be inaccurate and outdated.

*Rural regions in the pilot action and beyond are acting as proactive regions that are advancing many things through expertise, cooperation and commitment despite limited resources.*

The activation of the civil population and stronger cooperation are not intended to replace the control and steering function of the public sector or to shift responsibility for compulsory municipal tasks. Cooperative regional development activates and promotes cooperation and a sense of community among local citizens, offers space for new actor constellations between public administration, private sector and civil society and requires close interlinking of the specialised authorities.

The resulting dynamics not only strengthen the community feeling, but also enable an improved perception of local problems, the bridging of capacity bottlenecks and thus an easier implementation of measures to secure the provision of public services. In order to support these processes more effectively, it is also necessary to improve financial incentives and administrative, strategic and planning framework conditions at the state and regional level. To this end, the pilot action has brought together a large number of practical approaches and examples, which are summarised below as “lessons learned”.



#### COOPERATIVE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

... activates and promotes cooperation and a sense of community among local citizens.

... offers space for new actor constellations between public administration, private sector and civil society.

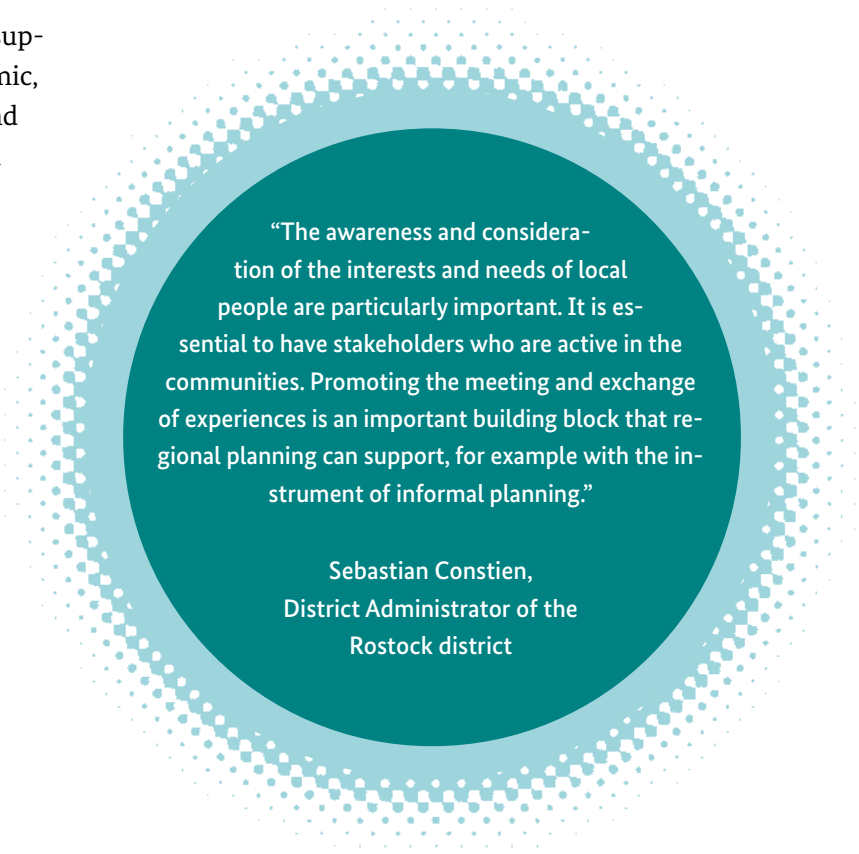
... requires close interlinking of the specialised authorities.

## *Involvement and activation of the local population*

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The local population must be involved in transformation processes, and their needs and realities of life must be taken into account in planning. This can be a lengthy process which is realised through participation and information procedures. Such processes of networking should result in the development of common informal strategies for the transformation of the (sub-)region in order to actively guide local development and cooperation:

- **Creating places of encounter:** Bringing people and their ideas together requires spaces where concepts can be actively and collaboratively developed. The construction and conceptualisation of easily accessible places that can be used by all should also be included in funding programmes at national or regional level.
- **Community managers (“village carers”)** support the improvement of the local economic, social and cultural situation. As neutral and trustworthy persons of contact, they form the mediating link between concerns of the local people and the responsible authorities, specialised agencies and other stakeholders. In many places, these activities are carried out on a voluntary basis. Long-term, but low-threshold support for community managers can have a great leverage effect on the development of measures for the provision of public services on the ground.
- **Communication of new measures:** The lack of knowledge or the inhibition threshold for the use of new offers, for example for local amenities or alternative mobility offers, is usually high in rural areas. Offers must therefore be actively brought into use. This requires marketing and communication work and an active approach to citizens, the private sector or public institutions. New forms of digital communication, such as specialised apps or social media, offer effective and important supplements.



“The awareness and consideration of the interests and needs of local people are particularly important. It is essential to have stakeholders who are active in the communities. Promoting the meeting and exchange of experiences is an important building block that regional planning can support, for example with the instrument of informal planning.”

Sebastian Constien,  
District Administrator of the  
Rostock district

## Capacities and the definition of roles in administration

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Mastering current challenges and the transition towards a proactive region requires a useful mix of methods and measures. The development of joint measures and strategies for future developments as well as the activation and cooperation with various local stakeholders must also take place in the form of inter-municipal cooperation to avoid isolated, defragmented solutions and bundle forces and capacities in a meaningful way. To enable this, tasks, capacities and the definition of roles need to be adapted at the administrative level:

- **Bundling of offices within the administration:** Integrated measures at the local level require the involvement of different offices and administrative levels. To be able to implement ideas and measures more quickly at the local level, administrative structures at the supra-local level should also work in an integrated manner (one-stop shop). Thematic competence centres, in which networking activities already take place at the level of regional and local administrations, not only facilitate faster coordination between specialised authorities, but at the same time can also more easily transmit information about projects and funding opportunities to actors on the ground. In addition, a better basis of trust can be built up through fixed contact persons.
- **Harmonisation and supplementation of administrative cuts:** The responsibilities for ensuring services of general interest are clearly defined at different levels. In practice, however, this also means that synergies are difficult to activate. Cross-cutting data collection, needs analysis etc. can facilitate synergetic effects between formally responsible agencies. There are also opportunities for synergies in funding. On the one hand it is possible to bundle European, national and state programmes for investment measures to leverage larger project volumes. On the other hand, synergies can also be achieved through the implementation of “soft” measures of national funding programmes, for example through regional exchange networks of applicants or technical support from the state level.
- **Investing in brains:** One of the greatest challenges for almost all sparsely populated regions is the increasing lack of qualified labour in public administrations. Securing attractive jobs increasingly requires regional and national initiatives as well. Networking and marketing initiatives between places of education and rural municipalities, the involvement of regional agencies and networking bodies, and staff exchange and loan programmes between administrative staff from larger cities and rural regions are possible measures to address deficits and to target and recruit young graduates.

## Further development of planning systems

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Through opening and experimentation clauses or through pilot actions and experimental laboratories, one can free space and capacities to test innovations, also at the level of planning systems. Innovations must be rewarded, and appropriate framework conditions must be created to enable experimentation with new ideas:

- **Having the courage to allow for flexibility in the planning system:** If conventional instruments of planning for services of general interest are no longer effective in supporting the active transformation of regions, consideration should be given to making legal requirements and regulations in planning practices more flexible – even to the point of temporarily suspending them. This applies, for example, to the definition of the supply functions of places that serve local amenities and are not formally provided for. Experimentation clauses can enable the implementation of pilot projects that are also allowed to fail.
- **Adapting planning systems to the local digital reality:** Planning requirements at local or regional level should not contradict the possibilities of digitalisation. Thanks to technical possibilities, services in health care or local amenities, for example, are no longer exclusively available in central locations. Digital strategies for spatial development should be developed at national and regional level, and locally applicable technical and planning standards should be developed. The goal should be to prevent spatially incompatible and isolated solutions of innovative care offers.
- **Data collection for a better overview:** The need for action is not always adequately perceived. To raise awareness of deficits in services of general interest, up-to-date and micro-scale data is needed, for example on population and demand development. Evidence-based studies and surveys can facilitate argumentation and provide a better overview of the status quo when it comes to convincing decision-makers and planners of concrete measures. However, the use of data is also an important basis for starting a dialogue with politicians and the population. In this context, it is helpful to argue not only from a specific sectoral perspective (health or mobility), but from an integrated and overarching perspective in which the spatial interaction of different sectors is taken into account.



## *Make funding programmes accessible also to municipalities with limited capacities*

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A key element for improving the capacity to act on the ground is the targeted support through funding programmes. In addition to thematic funding, it is particularly important to consider integrated and place-based approaches. Especially smaller municipalities in rural areas are often confronted with a multitude of investment programmes and their requirements, whose structural preconditions cannot always be met. For example, they often lack the integrated concepts that are required for strategic funding, or the necessary stakeholder constellations do not yet exist or exist only to an insufficient extent:

- **Promote not only investment measures, but also processes:** Even uncomplicated and flexible low-threshold funding offers can have a leverage effect and set cooperation processes in motion. Small municipalities often lack technical support when it comes to large investment programmes targeting specific investment outcome indicators. Technical support through preparatory programmes in which, for example, the strategic development of integrated spatial concepts is promoted can provide good incentives for the development of joint processes. Other incentives include providing a financial bonus for problem-related inter-municipal cooperation and supporting coordination processes for inter-municipal partnerships.
- **Breaking down the narrow constraints of funding logics:** Innovative measures also need innovative forms of funding. Some measures in which different themes are bundled do not always correspond to the funding logic of region-

al or national development programmes. To ensure that these do not fall through the cracks, it is important to design funding programmes at the national or regional level in a way that also supports innovative measures, for example in the interaction of cultural and economic promotion.

- **Bundling funding programmes at the supra-local level:** The bundling of different funding measures for on-ground projects often takes place at the local level. However, this is often associated with different deadlines, review requirements etc., which quickly overwhelm smaller municipalities. In order to simplify this, funding programmes can be bundled at the national or regional level. Approaches such as the pan-German funding system for structurally weak regions (“Das gesamtdeutsche Fördersystem für strukturschwache Regionen”) have provided more clarity, without however leading to significant simplifications for users.
- **Long-term support and place-based projects:** In addition to short-term, low-threshold ad-hoc measures, it is particularly important to offer long-term investment programmes and support measures. Support programmes and measures that build on each other over several programme periods offer local stakeholders more planning security.

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*Strengthening the  
territorial dimension  
in EU policy  
approaches*

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*Strengthening the vitality and adaptability of rural areas to cope with supra-regional developments and structural changes is a central task, not only for national and regional leaders. Long-term initiatives are also necessary at European level to support social cohesion and territorial cohesion at all levels.*

In 2022, the European Commission stated in the 8th Cohesion Report that convergence between member states is accelerating. However, regional disparities within economically growing member states have increased. This development will be reinforced in the coming years by an increasing process of demographic ageing and a decrease in population.

The results of the pilot action show a multitude of approaches, examples and measures, that can be utilised by proactive regions to meet the challenges of economic, social and territorial cohesion in the European Union. Consequently, the support of local communities of responsibility based on low-threshold funding offers should also be increasingly addressed in EU programmes and adequately considered in its territorial dimension.



**34 % → 51 %**

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In 2020, 34 per cent of the EU population lived in shrinking regions. This proportion is projected to rise to 51 per cent in 2040, according to the 8th Cohesion Report.

The following aspects are of particular importance against the background of the shared experiences within the framework of the pilot action “A future for lagging regions”:

- Global economic, social and ecological trends as well as technological developments unleash individual potentials and developments for each region. EU funding must therefore be able to respond individually to different spatial components and factors. The preservation and development of place-based funding approaches are therefore of extraordinary importance to be able to properly reflect the specific challenges of structurally weak rural regions.
- Structural development and the support of decentralised structures of services of general interest against the background of demographic change should be more clearly reflected in future EU funding periods. In this context, funding priorities should be redesigned from sectoral and specific approaches to integrated approaches. Political objective 5 of the EU Structural Funds “a Europe closer to its citizens”, which is relevant in the field of territorial development, should also play a role in this context after 2027. It is directly related to the objectives of the Territorial Agenda 2030.
- It is crucial to maintain the compactness and well-established processes of existing funds. An ever-increasing diversification of the funding landscape into different funding pots, such as special and crisis funds, leads to excessive demands, especially on smaller municipalities. A binding percentage earmarking of the existing funds for territorial issues would be more effective.
- For the idea of cohesion in European funding policy to be put into practice effectively, smaller municipalities with limited personnel capacities must also be able to apply for funding and implement projects. The promotion of urban-rural partnerships and approaches to inter-municipal cooperation has proven its worth in the past. At the same time, the promotion of inter-municipal mergers is not an end in itself – it must continue to be based on clear needs and projects.
- Before investment measures can be implemented, they must be prepared. Therefore, EU funding must also cover non-investment measures such as the preparation of strategies and integrated development concepts as well as the establishment of stakeholder structures and communities of responsibility. Non-investment funding programmes such as transnational cooperation within the framework of Interreg B or complementary national funding programmes can offer valuable additions to support the development of activating measures and structures in rural areas. Accordingly, investment and non-investment funding programmes should be linked not only thematically but also structurally.

## Conclusions on the implementation of the pilot action

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*The pilot action proved to be a helpful implementation tool to anchor the goals of the Territorial Agenda among practitioners and decision-makers at local and regional level. In this way, it was possible to increase the visibility and relevance of TA 2030.*

The dialogue format in its compact form and on an equal footing with the EU Commission, national and regional ministries, municipalities all the way down to the level of local authorities, and across member state borders adds a great deal of value to multi-level governance. The pilot actions can serve as a relevant seismograph for both the EU level and the national level to further develop their own initiatives, measures and funding programmes.

At the level of the participating regions, the transnational exchange on common challenges as well as approaches for possible solutions proved to be very helpful and also led to bilateral cooperation outside the activities within the framework of the partnership. The promotion of regional actions made it possible to initiate process innovations and cooperation.

In order to further develop the instrument of pilot actions, an evaluation will be carried out. Processes, expectations and the form of cooperation, results and objectives from the experiences of the first generation of pilot actions must be included and adapted where necessary. In order to further implement TA 2030, a permanent programmatic anchoring as well as a clear political commitment of all participating states and the European Commission is needed.

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*Overview of  
the TA 2030  
pilot actions  
with German  
participation*

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*In addition to the German pilot action, other TA 2030 pilot actions were implemented with German participation, under the leadership of other European countries.*



#### **Norwegian pilot action: Small Places Matter**

The pilot action “Small places matter”, led by Norway, addressed the role of small towns and villages in the realisation of integrated territorial development strategies and in strengthening inter-municipal cooperation. The aim was to gain insights into the importance of the Territorial Agenda for small places and to explore how the role of small towns and cities as anchor points for their surrounding areas can be strengthened in the context of territorial development. From the German side, the small town of Rodewisch in Saxony participated. Building on the preliminary work of the Small-Town Academy and the regional development concept for the “Göltzschtal” association of mid-sized towns, three sub-projects were implemented, each of which focused on activating the involvement of the local population. The main topics were the development



Town of Rodewisch

of a playground, the implementation of a multi-functional meeting place and the revitalisation of the town centre through a flexible “pop-up store”.



Pünderich, Rhineland-Palatinate



### **Luxembourg pilot action: Cross-border spatial planning**

The pilot action “Cross-border spatial planning” was launched by the Luxembourg Ministry of Energy and Spatial Planning to initiate a mutual learning process with partners from all over Europe and to get input for the strategic orientation of the spatial planning concept currently under revision. As part of the Luxembourg in Transition process, the Ministry worked together with stakeholders from Luxembourg and neighbouring regions on a territorial vision and implementation

strategy with concrete projects for a decarbonised and resilient cross-border functional region. In Germany, the Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and Sport participated as a partner in the pilot action. Among other things, an intensive exchange of expertise took place within the framework of workshop discussions in order to evaluate the experiences from the pilot action for state and regional development in Rhineland-Palatinate (and beyond). In this context, the findings regarding the management of cross-border functional spaces that exist at the Rhineland-Palatinate state borders are of particular use.



### Polish pilot action: Territorial impact assessment of sectoral policies

The focus of the Polish-led pilot action “Region-focused territorial impact assessment (TIA)” was the application of spatial impact analysis to investigate the impact of sector policies on spatial disparities. The findings of the analysis are to be used to support the development of future sector policies, for example in the framework of guidelines or measures, and thus to better take into account the needs of citizens as well as place-specific conditions. As the German partner of the pilot action, the Joint Spatial Planning Department of Berlin-Brandenburg conducted a study on the impacts of the railway expansion in the border region with Poland based on the railway line Berlin–Gorzów Wielkopolski (“Ostbahn”). The participatory and methodologically innovative approach of the TIA allowed the involvement of local stakeholders in workshops and regional conferences and the identification of the territorial impacts of the cross-border investment project on the fields of settlement development and spatial structure, society and social affairs, economic development, tourism, environment and governance.



Ostbahn bridge near Küstrin-Kietz



### Swiss pilot action: Climate action in Alpine towns

The pilot action “Climate action in Alpine towns”, led by the Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE), implemented climate actions in eight Alpine towns. The main objective of this pilot action was to gain a better understanding of the role of small towns in sustainable development processes in the Alps and to understand how they can be further supported in this respect. For this purpose, a report was prepared on the impact of Alpine towns on the regions and on the current state of development of the settlement system. Five scenarios were developed that identified new development opportunities for the future. In parallel, pilot activities were supported in eight towns, including the town of Sonthofen in Germany. Here, tensions between pedestrians and cyclists repeatedly arose in the pedestrian zone, which were examined in more detail in a conflict analysis. The analysis helped to objectify the discussion and thus supported the ongoing realisation of the local cycling concept.

Cycling through Sonthofen’s town centre



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