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Demographic Change

Are equal living conditions falling to the wayside?

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The creation of social spaces in which individual social groups can meet and interact with one another contributes to this, as well as intergenerational activities.

It should be possible to delegate tasks to either appropriately trained staff or external consultants to ensure efficient implementation and long-term effectiveness of projects. The funding of these projects should also be more sustainable.

Services available in a given region should be better promoted because in many cases, their target groups are often ill informed about them. This can create further incentives to stay.

POPULATION EUROPE

THE NETWORK OF EUROPE'S LEADING
DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH CENTRES

While the population of many cities in Germany continues to grow, rural regions located near these metropolises are confronted with a declining population. This often has to do with more people moving away from than to these rural regions. Research focused on the United Kingdom found that individuals living close to their parents would prefer to continue living in this location in the future (Ermisch & Mulder, 2019). The most common reasons for moving are related to employment and education opportunities and the desire to be closer to family, but moves related to the housing market are less likely (Thomas, 2019). These reasons have to be better understood in order to make rural areas more attractive to people that may move.

How can cities and municipalities respond to these changes and what steps can be taken to maintain the quality of life in regions with a shrinking population? What are the differences in the needs and demands of young generations, young families and older generations? These questions were the subject of a meeting held in Berlin on 20 January 2020 on behalf of a project funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, in which experts from research, policy, local government and civil society in Germany discussed possible solutions.

Younger Generation

How can the living situation of the young generation in communities be sustainably improved to encourage them to stay or return in the future? In addition to creating work and education perspectives, participants in this working group emphasised the importance of giving young people more opportunities to participate, particularly in the communal decision-making process. In many instances, young people are not asked how they would improve their community because particularly in rural areas, the situation of older people tends to be the focus of projects and there are not many projects related to the living situation of young people. Take the example of digitalisation in rural regions: This topic often centres around how older people will be able to cope with the new technological changes, but what these changes mean for young people is hardly addressed. A fundamental change of perspective is necessary: The needs of the younger generation must become more prominent in public initiatives.

However, the inclusion of young people in the decision-making process is not enough. Their opinions must be reflected in the decisions themselves and be more

appreciated overall. The *Children's World+ Survey* found that when students do not feel like their opinions are of interest or their suggestions will be ignored, then they are less likely to participate in school life (Andresen, 2019: 30-31). Therefore, young people should not just be invited to be active participants, but should also be treated equally. This will help maintain their engagement and connection with their home towns – a fundamental reason to stay or return.

Similar to other age groups, having a reliable and secure living environment plays an important role. In addition to school, more designated spaces for young people to meet should be created. Such offers give young people room to create a largely self-organised community within their age group, which is a substantial advantage for the city or town.

Many working group participants mentioned that young people are often not aware of the existing offers in their immediate surroundings. Therefore, the various communication channels used by young people should be used more effectively to make sure this information is better communicated.

Young Families

A second working group focused on young families and how to make life in rural or urban areas attractive for them. Proximity to schools and the infrastructure for young people are important factors for families to decide to stay. Schools function as important meeting points for students, as well as for their parents to meet other families.

Therefore, it can be fatal, particularly in regions with strong population decline, to close schools. This makes it more difficult to create an attractive environment for families, especially because the closing of schools and other public institutions in an area act as a deterrent to people wanting to move, as this is often perceived as a sign of regional decline. Decisions about school locations should take into account the fact that this can create a vicious circle: Tax revenues and consumer spending decrease as fewer families move in, or rather families move away due to a school closing, which then makes it difficult to finance public infrastructure spending.

Having to become a commuter also plays an important role in a family's decision about where to live. In many cases, parents living in rural areas have to commute daily to work. The time spent commuting can already create an additional

stress because it reduces time available for family, free time and volunteer activities. This is also true for children that have to travel far for school and then have less time for extracurricular activities. It should be remembered that the voluntary work of parents is usually related to the everyday life of their children, for example in parents' associations or school initiatives. When these types of activities always take place in a distant town or community, one's own place of residence is perceived less and less as the actual centre of life. Thus, commuting can contribute to more strain on one's already limited schedule, which means engagement in the community becomes less likely and identification with one's town becomes weaker, making it easier to decide to move away.

Older Generation

The third working group talked about the situation of the older generation and made an important distinction: Many older people today enjoy good health, even in old age, and the number of "young old" is continually increasing. In the future, this could lead to more active citizens participating in their community's development.

In rural regions, more age appropriate apartments and multi-generational housing should be established, especially since older people no longer need large living spaces that were originally designed for a whole family. These spaces could then be offered to young families. The ability of a municipality to adapt the local housing market to the population's development and to create adequate housing for all parts of society will be a decisive factor in the future in determining its attractiveness.

A major structural change concerns the care sector. Family members still provide the majority of care services for elderly relatives in need of assistance. However, due to the changing composition of the population and increasing mobility, fewer and fewer family members will live nearby in the future who will be able to provide such services. In addition, they are not trained to provide care and often reach their limits due to the associated physical and psychological strain. Therefore, the working group proposed to either create better structures for institutional care, to further develop professional care services and/or to encourage closer cooperation between welfare organisations. In particular, more information about the local services accessible to older citizens should be made available – even before the need for care arises. This applies especially to the group of "young old", who can then make appropriate decisions

before they reach this phase of life.

Commonalities

In all of the working groups, participants mentioned that new projects for rural regions are constantly developed, but once the funding period is over, the projects abruptly end, even if they were actually successful. This is why ways should be found to implement projects more efficiently and, if successful, to continue them in order to strengthen the structures in the communities in the long term. Additional funding should also be available for experimental projects.

The participants also agreed that municipal decision-makers need to improve how they reach their residents and how they can participate in community life. In particular, efforts should be made so that people do not think important decisions are always made by a small group of people. For example, "citizen budgets" should be considered as a way for local residents to propose projects supported by the majority in the community and that can be implemented once approved. In the working group for young families, it was emphasised that scheduling of events is usually not very family-friendly. Often it is difficult for parents with small children or single parents to participate in meetings or gatherings in the evening.

Several experts shared the opinion that a bottom-up initiative is not always as successful as when projects have a clear leadership structure and someone responsible for heading up the project. The younger generation working group emphasised the importance of someone to help young people organise in a constructive manner, especially since many no longer join associations or clubs where such organisational structures already exist. The working group for young families suggested engaging an external consultant who would be evaluated based on the success of the project, who would not have any personal interests he or she was pursing and therefore, who would be best suited to moderate any potential conflicts of interest within the municipality. This person could also write proposals to request funding for new projects. The members of the older generation working group recognised that municipalities were reliant on the state and federal governments for financial support, but not all local governments, especially small communities, have the support staff capable to requesting these funds.

All groups mentioned the importance of providing meeting places that can be used as "social spaces" for people

of all generations (Kersten et al., 2017). Events to create solidarity, such as seasonal and cultural festivals, as well as sports events, would greatly contribute to building a sense of identity with one's community.
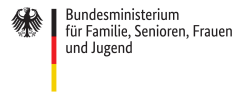
Policy Recommendations

– People want to feel like they belong to their community. Therefore, solutions need to be found so people from all generations in rural communities can be included in the decision-making process. A greater sense of solidarity with one's community can be a strong incentive to stay.

– The creation of social spaces in which individual social groups can meet and interact with one another contributes to this, as well as intergenerational activities.

– Not all communities have the necessary personnel capacities for successful project management. Therefore, it should be possible to delegate tasks to either appropriately trained staff or external consultants to ensure efficient implementation and long-term effectiveness of projects. The funding of these projects should also be more sustainable.

– Services available in a given region should be better promoted. In many cases, their target groups are often ill informed about them. This can create further incentives to stay. ■

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