

# New Ideas for Small Towns in Peripheral Locations in Germany. Experiences from a Participative Scenario-Based Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, small towns in peripheral locations of Germany are losing population and face the task to reconstruct and adapt to an aging population. For the future development of these towns, external factors will only be of little importance. To shape the processes of change, the focus has to be set on identifying and using their own local potential precisely. The identification of specific conditions for action and potentials of small towns in peripheral locations were the main goals of the research programme. It focused on scenario-based processes with the goal of a future vision. The scenario processes in 8 pilot projects have shown that intense participation of citizens and the use of creative techniques are major factors to open up new ideas. The results display how local people imagine the future of "their" small town. They are visions and potentials resulting from their own possibilities, take general developments into account and can be transferred to other small towns. 7 fields of action and factors of success can be summarised.

## KEYWORDS

Small town, Peripheralisation, Scenario, Cooperative planning, Germany

## RÉSUMÉ

Depuis les années 1990, les petites villes allemandes de zones périphériques voient diminuer leur population. Les facteurs externes joueront peu d'importance dans le développement futur de ces villes. Une identification préalable et une utilisation du potentiel local sont essentielles pour donner forme à ce changement. L'objet d'une des recherches a été d'identifier le potentiel de ces petites villes de zones périphériques, leurs conditions spécifiques puis de considérer les marges d'intervention dans le but d'établir des prévisions en modélisant le processus *via* des scénarios afin d'obtenir une vision prospective. Les processus à base de scénario de 8 projets pilotes ont montré que la participation intensive des habitants ainsi que l'utilisation de technologies créatives sont les facteurs clés qui déclenchent les nouvelles idées. Les résultats montrent comment les résidents voient le futur de « leur » petite ville.

## MOTS CLÉS

petite ville, périphérisation, scénario, planification coopérative, Allemagne

## INTRODUCTION

Germany is a country of small towns, with currently 2,112 small towns, 1,187 of which in central and 925 in peripheral locations (BMI & BBSR, 2018). Over a long period of time, small towns primarily functioned as service locations for their mostly agrarian surroundings. Factors such as increased mobility, changes of trade and logistics, new working worlds and an enhanced appreciation of living in big cities have had an impact on the appeal and development of small towns and decreased the tie to their immediate surroundings considerably. The location plays an important role here. Small towns close to big cities are still gaining population on average and have to react to the increasing need for places to live, and technical and social infrastructure. The situation of many small towns away from big centres is very different. Since the 1990s, they are losing population and face the task to maintain infrastructures and supply, to reconstruct and adapt to an aging population (Gatzweiler, 2012). For a long time, new jobs were considered to be the key for stabilisation and development. But statistics show that this is not correct in every case. Obviously, the situation of small towns in peripheral locations is more complex (BBSR, 2019). For a prospective development path, literature points out the need to strengthen small towns' capacities in peripheral locations. The discussion about peripheralisation should also be pointed out (Kühn, 2016). It arised out of some discomfort regarding the distinction of areas

as central or peripheral, and the associated internal and external messages. The discussion criticises that, in a sense, periphery is a static condition that can only be overcome through an enhanced accessibility of the centres –therefore periphery is geographical fate. Peripheralisation is understood as a socio-spatial descent not only affecting rural areas but also parts of metropolitan regions. The particular charm of the concept is its dynamic characteristic as a process that describes the descent –opposite to de-peripheralisation understood as a rise– and the fact that it attributes competence to the local people. In general opinion, external factors will only be of little importance in the future. To shape the processes of change in an early stage, the focus has to be on identifying and using own local potential precisely, which takes a joint discourse of politics, administration, citizenship and economy to open up new paths of small-town-development.

The presentation points out how new paths for small towns in peripheral areas can be developed with a scenario-based approach. Additionally, the future topics and success factors of a cooperative small-town development gained in the field of research will be presented. The authors had two functions in the process: the work as research assistance responsible for the analysis of the research and the local participation processes, and the work as a moderator of the local processes.

## **1. A RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON SMALL TOWNS IN PERIPHERAL LOCATIONS.**

### **GOALS, TOPICS, SCENARIO-BASED APPROACH**

From 2016 to 2018, the nationwide research programme “Potentials of small towns in peripheral regions” has been performed in Germany to meet the significance of small towns in peripheral regions. The identification of specific conditions for action and their potentials, as well as the development of a methodological framework for a cooperative small-town planning were the main goals of the programme. Recommendations for the federation, the states and municipalities, about a sustainable urban development policy derived from this. In addition, it contributed to the advancement of small-town research as well as to raising the (professional) public awareness for challenges and potentials of small towns in Germany.

In a selection process, 8 pilot projects were selected out of 76 proposals: Bad Lobenstein (Thuringia), Beverungen (North Rhine-Westphalia), Großschönau (Saxony), Kastellaun (Rhineland-Palatinate), Malente (Schleswig-Holstein), Mücheln (Saxony-Anhalt), Rodewisch (Saxony) and Zell am Harmersbach (Baden-Wuerttemberg). The population of the towns ranges from 5,000 up to 13,000 inhabitants (BBSR, 2019). The programme was structured using four topics: (1) Cooperative small-town planning, (2) Learning network, (3) Small-town research as well as (4) Public relations and transfer. It focused on the processes of a joint small-town planning with the goal of a (new-) orientation and a future vision the small-town community can bear and implement. The central questions were: How to keep small towns sustainable and livable or make them livable for others; which potential not yet recognised or used can contribute to this, and what inherited patterns of behaviour have to be changed or left behind. The programme was responsible for enabling this process, providing professional support and creating an organisational and methodological framework. It focused on two essential starting points to enable new approaches: the use of creative- and future-techniques that are attributed to playing a special role for finding new paths especially related to small towns; and participation as an important issue for finding new paths (Selle, 2005). Both points were incorporated in the design and the implementation of a scenario process.

The selection of its methods in the 8 pilot projects was based on: local acceptance, holistic view, possibility of imaginative leaps into the future, and a communicable prospective vision as a result. Moreover, the guiding principle was to construct the process as an open and transparent way of civic participation rather than as a strategic and explorative expert-process. Against this backdrop, the design of a narrative normative scenario has been selected. In normative scenarios, positive visions of the future are formed, and wishes and visions are described. “Narrative” means that literary scenarios are built and a story is being told that is suitable to let the participants’ emotions work as a catalyst for the planning process; it is good to connect to implementation with the help of little stories about persons, places and actions (van Hulst, 2012; Rasmussen, 2005).

In all pilot projects, a 20-to-25-member “scenario group” was formed as the core of participation in the cooperative process. Overall, about 180 to 200 local players were involved in the scenario processes, whose framework was structured into five phases (Meyr & Günter, 2011; Kosow & Gaßner, 2008) with their own goals and functions:

1. Entry and determination of the scenario field: Initiation of the scenario group, presentation of the process self-concept, clarification of the basic conditions (main question, reference area, time horizon);
2. Analysis of the status quo: Common discussion about the factors influencing the development of the town (from the local up to the global level, put together in the form of a mind map presenting an integrated picture of the current situation), determination of key factors as basis for the next phase;

3. Mental leap into the future: Development of future headlines (What would you like to read about your city in the newspaper in 2030?), presentation and assessment of the future headlines, compilation of basic points underpinning the selected best headlines (keywords, places, activities, persons) –subsequent formulation of a scenario-exposé;

4. Discussion of the scenario-exposé (Does the paper fulfill the ideas of the scenario group? Are there any additions necessary?) and an alternative negative scenario (mostly based on unforeseeable external factors influencing the development of the town) –subsequent formulation of a final version of the scenario 2030;

5. Scenario transfer: Final discussion of the scenario (topics and atmosphere, desirable and critical aspects) as a foundation for the implementation selection of leader and starter projects consistent with the ideas of the scenario, definition of responsibilities for the implantation process, evaluation of the participation process. The approach functioned well in the pilot projects. The substantive goals could be achieved; especially working with future headlines and the technique of storytelling with a narrative scenario turned out as a good way to encourage the players to participate actively. Also working with an alternative scenario proved to be an important step in most cases. This way, consisting ideas could be reconsidered, augmented or confirmed.

## 2. RESULTS

### 2.1 Future topics for small towns

The results of the scenario processes display how local people imagine the future of “their” small town. They are visions and potentials resulting of their own possibilities, take general developments and influences into account and can be transferred to other small towns. Seven fields of action can be underlined: (1) quality of life, housing and lifestyle –it is about good circumstances for ones’ own life and new inhabitants, not so much about jobs, (2) well linked, alternative and flexible ways of mobility and accessibility of close centres, (3) a local environment of associations and places for community and communication as major pillars of social cohesion and engagement, (4) education and economy based on knowledge economy, services and creative places and people, (5) tourism as a cross-sectoral issue touching many aspects of life quality with its offers and infrastructures that tourists as well as inhabitants can benefit from, (6) digitisation as part of new solutions and strategies with its possibilities of different kinds of availability, networking and offers, (7) cooperation to the inside and outside as a major approach, if goals of small-town development cannot be reached with formerly used instruments.

### 2.2 Factors of success of a cooperative small-town planning

The scenario processes and other formats of participation used in the pilot projects of the programme have shown that intense citizens’ participation, communication and the use of creative techniques are major factors to open up new sustainable potentials. Cooperative small-town planning is the path to be shaped into a permanent task. This is a cooperative process between town community, local economy, politics and administration with the goal of a good life in a small town. It usually needs an impulse and opportunities, as well as places for learning and experimenting to initiate the transformative potential of change of citizens, economy, politics and administration. It is about building structures and spaces to allow the players to exchange and develop different ideas and initiatives equally and from their own perspectives. Such spaces can be Youth-Bar Camps and scenario processes as tested in the programme. Finally, major factors of success of processes of cooperative small-town planning can be summarised: (1) support from local politics, (2) good external mentoring, (3) participation and information with appropriate instruments, (4) motivation and engagement of all players in the process, (5) financial and human resources to secure the main process, (6) realisation of the project as a sign of a successful process, (7) experience exchange and corporate learning.

### 2.3 Central recommendations for a sustainable policy for small towns in Germany

It became obvious that especially small towns with their limited financial and human resources need more attention, support and mentoring. They have to be supported by federation and states to maintain their vitality, social and economic strengths, as well as their function as a centre in the region, and extend it collaboratively. This takes the safety of a basic funding for small towns in first place, so that they can complete their standard tasks as well as their important strategic voluntary tasks.

The federation and the states funding programmes aim more and more at supporting small towns on the path of a “cooperative small-town development” with the goal of a vivid, diverse and functional town with an individual urbanity borne by the citizens. Accordingly, two fields of funding should be strengthened and developed: (1) funding of planning and process: “Cooperative small-town planning”; and (2) investment-related

funding focuses: small-town urbanity following the discussions in the pilot projects and the composition of the existing funding initiatives, e.g. in urban development funding.

Beyond that, the implementation of the idea of a “small-town academy” is recommended, as an open learning network for knowledge transfer –about small-town relevant current and future topics, and about methods for a joint small-town development– and the promotion of a sustainability and resilience.

Besides, two more interventions are recommended to improve knowledge and public attention about small towns: (1) a small-town campaign or initiative making lifestyle and life quality in small towns and the special challenges for securing and developing these small-town-specific qualities a public topic, (2) the continuation and strengthening of the informal network of researchers formed in this programme. All things considered, the federation and the states should systematically and preferably promote basic and applied interdisciplinary research on small towns (ARL, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the scenario method, it can be noted that a normative, narrative scenario process adjusted on ideals can provide a good opening impulse for a cooperative urban development process. The special strengths of the scenario method are the playful examination with the future and quality of life in the town. Group dynamics, a joint consensus and the holistic easy to understand result are added. Participants experience a new quality of togetherness and a more conscious confrontation with the diversity of their town. This way, a new culture of planning can be promoted locally: participative, holistically oriented and strategically focused. However, creative techniques as narrative scenarios do not replace analytic thinking. Rather they can be seen as a bridge between analytic-oriented planning and creativity-oriented development of visions. They have to be reasonably linked to “classical” techniques of urban planning and integrated urban development. Accordingly, action plans and strategy papers have been worked out parallel to or following the scenario process in the pilot projects to strategically pool the results (fields of action, leader projects, starter projects being implemented in the short-term) and operationalise them for their following implementation.

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