

Civic Engagement – a New Self–Understanding of Villages?

Alexandra Weitkamp and Pia Steffenhagen (Germany)

Key words: Land management; Spatial planning; Civic Engagement, Village Development, Conversion of Vacant Buildings, Demographic Change

SUMMARY

In Germany and also in other European countries, many rural regions are increasingly characterized by the agro-structural and demographic change. Beneath, public authorities are affected in their development by their financial constraints. But these regions should not be generally associated with structural weakness or disadvantages. However, many of them are seriously disadvantaged in terms of economic strength, infrastructure or general common prosperity. Many villages are facing various problems, e.g. high building vacancy rates and decay, reduced attractiveness of the village and landscape, job and population declines and other infrastructure losses. The aim of the "equivalent living conditions" cannot be longer guaranteed. Here, a new interpretation is required: structural changes recommend a greater "self-responsibility" of the affected rural regions. The classic state-guaranteed obtaining and expansion of (material) infrastructure is no longer financially viable. More flexible infrastructures, more organized by private sector or civil society, are needed. However, a lively civil society is essential in villages. In recent years, the strengthening of civil society and a changed understanding of the state influence the concepts of civic, social or voluntary activities. The activities are based on the increasing willingness to voluntary, gratuitous engagement of the society. In particular, the rural population has a high sense of responsibility and the willingness for commitment. As part of a research project these aspects were explored and the potential of activation was determined. The motivations of engaged people are characterized by different perspectives. A behavior analysis was the starting point of the study. Engagement, its circumstances and the associated potentials were studied in a survey and a case study investigation. The analysis allows the conclusion that villagers are potentially willing to engage in projects for common re-use of buildings. But they have to deal with high risks of conversion, financing the projects, formalities and a sustainable maintenance of the project after conversion. Also many currently non-volunteers can imagine to help, but a lack of time is referred as an obstacle. Concluding, village development will be more successful, if a long-term engagement is supported by short time engaged people (maybe only one time). Overall, rural regions are maybe characterized by abandoned buildings, but they have a lot of potential. The villagers are often willing to engage and to work with the community for a better future. These people are strong in cohesion and cause a positive change or maybe only prevent a further decline of their village.