Civic Engagement – a New Self-Understanding of Villages?

Alexandra WEITKAMP and Pia STEFFENHAGEN, Germany

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SUMMARY
In Germany and in other European countries, many rural regions are increasingly characterized by the agro-structural and demographic change. Beneath, the financial constraints of the public authorities affect their development. However, these regions should not be generally associated with structural weakness or disadvantages. Many of them are seriously disadvantaged in terms of economic strength, infrastructure or general common prosperity and have to deal with 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. Rural villages often need infrastructures, which are more flexible as well as more organized by private sector or civil society. However, a lively civil society is essential in villages.

In recent years, the strengthening of civil society and a changed understanding of the state support the development of concepts for 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 activation potential of engagement were determined. Different perspectives characterize the motivations of engaged people. 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 vacant buildings. Nevertheless, they have to deal with high risks of conversion, financing the projects, formalities and a sustainable maintenance of the project after conversion. In addition, 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 short time engaged people support a long-term engagement (maybe only one time).

Abandoned buildings maybe characterize in general, but they also have many potentials. 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.
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1. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF RURAL REGIONS
The agro-structural and demographic change strongly affects many rural regions and the financial constraints of public hand weaken the development. Although rural regions may not be generally regarded as structural weak or disadvantaged, many are greatly disadvantaged in terms of economic strength, infrastructure equipment or general common prosperity dimensions. "Structural weakness" is not limited to specific spatial categories such as rural regions. However, in structurally weak rural regions the problems accumulate. Many villages are facing manifold problems, e.g. building vacancy and decay, decrease of the townscape and landscape image, job and population decline and more infrastructure losses (Voß et al. 2011). Experts forecast a continued demographic shift towards a higher density in urban areas, which would lead to a further local disadvantage in rural regions (Siedentop et al. 2011: pp. 17). To ensure the sustainability of villages and rural regions in the long term, many municipalities are already active. They are eager to secure the vitality and activities of village associations, promote civic engagement and a sense of responsibility as well as to bind young people to the region and to prevent emigration. Therefore, constantly villages exist, which are able to control the impacts of certain actions and to ward off abuses. Unlike other neighboring places, they are able to secure the sustainability of the village (Henkel 2010; Kötter 2009).

The aim of the "equivalent living conditions" can no longer be guaranteed (i. a. Blotevogel and Danielzyk 2006). This shows the need for a new interpretation: (Aring 2010) claims a more "personal responsibility" of the concerned rural regions. In the future, more flexible, more private sector or civil society organized infrastructures are needed. However, having a working, vibrant civil society in the villages and an altered understanding of the state towards civic, social or voluntary activity is crucial (Olk and Hartnusz 2011).

2. BACKGROUNDS AND CONTEXTS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

2.1 Definition
Strengthening the civil society and a changed understanding of the state characterize the terms of civic, social or voluntary engagement. Nowadays, a greater willingness to voluntary, gratuitous engagement of civil society could be perceived (Olk and Hartnusz 2011: 145). According to the German *Enquête-Kommission*¹ “Future of Civic Engagement” (Deutscher Bundestag 2002: 24, Mai and Swiaczny 2008: 8, BMFSFJ 2012: 11 f.) “Engagement” is be defined by:

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¹ At the request of a quarter of its members, the German Bundestag has to establish “Enquête-Kommissionen” (commissions of inquiry). These commissions should prepare extensive, meaningful subjects for decisions.
Corsten et al. (2008: 12) complement the listing by consistency and foreseeability. Therefore, a one-time activity is not deemed as civic engagement. In addition, a participation in the form of repeated support e.g. in projects is understood as civic engagement. The term "not profit oriented" means: As long as the performance exceeds the economic counter value, it can be assumed that the activities are not oriented on material gain (Corsten et al. 2008: 12).

Figure 1 visualizes the disparities of the spatial distribution of engaged people in Germany. In a study, named “Engagementatlas 2009”, east-west disparities and in the western regions a North-South divide are obvious. The western regions have high engagement rates compared with the eastern regions; the societies in the southern states are clearly more active than in the northern states. Villages and rural regions are assessed very positive: the study determined strong urban-rural contrasts. Engagement thrives significantly in rural regions and the rate is higher than the average (with more than 37%, the proportion is 10% higher than in central cities). Small communities achieve the highest engagement rates. This indicates that a large part of the citizens in villages is already active today (Prognos AG et al. 2009: pp. 18).

2.2 Behavior as Motivator
Why do people follow the objective of engagement? Why does a person seek a particular goal at all? With these questions, the so-called motivational psychology is concerned. It examines goal-oriented behavior of people (motivation for actions) and tries to explain alignment, endurance and intensity to strive this goal. The purposeful behavior is always considered in a complex set of goals (Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4; Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2010: 3). Motivation arises by an interaction of influences which are characterized on one side by the human nature (motives, needs, interests, goals) and on the other side the environment.
(opportunities, requirements, incentives)(Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4). Motivationencompasses allmotives (Schüramm 2013: 30),(Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 43) definemotivesas "individualpreferences for certainincentiveclasses." Being motivatedmeans, in addition toaffective(emotional) and cognitive(conscious) processes, to pursue a calculated objective, but also to engage with passion for somethingand to generate subjective well-being (Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4). Personal and situational influences determine this motivation and the corresponding targeted oriented action (behavior).

In addition to the factor human nature ("person itself"), the valence (incentive value or valuation) of the factor "environment" is crucial and acting ona person. The incentivevalue must beevaluated individually, because it has possibly different effectson different people and can change over time (Rothermund and Eder 2011: pp. 43).

Motives explain why people with specific goals respond to specific incentives in a situation, while others do not (Schürmann 2013: pp. 29). In a survey of volunteers, three types of motivation of volunteers were identified: (1) People, who are oriented to public welfare, mainly want to do something forthe common good and help others. They are mainly active in the regions of social affairs and health, school and kindergarten as well as church and religion. (2) The companionship-oriented people are superficially interested in the fun of the activity and to familiarize themselves with sympathetic people. (3) The interest-oriented people represent their own interests, take on their own responsibility, and want to expand their knowledge/experience and gain recognition. For this type, especially many young people have an affinity. The interest-oriented ones are a bit more connected to the common good than the companionship-oriented ones (Gensicke and Geiss 2010: 122).

People usually choose tasks or engagement activities, which suit best to their motives and thus best to their needs. So activities must be offered, which meet the personal needs of engaged people to gain positive effects on their willingness to participate (Schürmann 2013: 41). The motivation to engage themselves can be summarized in five sections:

- Altruistic motives | Duty and public welfare
- Community-based motives | Communication and social integration
- Formation-based motives | Active participation
- Problem-oriented motives | Coping with their own problems and changes
- Social grievances
- Development-related motives | Self-realization

Basis of all motives is the factor “fun” (Enquete-Kommission 2002a: 270).

3. Survey of Civic Engagement in Rural Villages

As part of the research project surveys of various kinds were carried out. Local stakeholders were questioned about their experiences with engagement and citizens in the framework of a household survey. Stakeholders within best practices were interviewed as well.
3.1 Workshop
As part of a workshop with the focus on engagement in village development, a brainstorming was performed on engagement, its opportunities and barriers. The participants were administrators and villagers politicians, came from regional management or land development management or were citizen groups/organisations mainly from Lower Saxony. The motivation forengagement limits and framework were collected within group work. Afterwards, the different group systematized and ordered the ideas within a second pass. Projects are followed which are "at heart" and important for subject motivated engagement (interest motivation). Many want to be active in groups (engagement needs supporters or a common goal), want to socialize and to engage in the home and for the family (binding motives). It is beneficial for future engagement when projects or activities were successful in the past. Also quick and visible results and available (financial means) have a positive effect. Accordingly, a lack of resources and high time requirements, excessive demands of parties as well as high goals, financial barriers and a lack of success inhibitory have negative effects on civic engagement.

Economic interests as well as individual motives such as self-expression and fun motivate people to engage themselves. Nevertheless, some people need a personal addressing to participate in certain projects. Some of the engaged people need suffering to get involved. However, this can also have an obstructing effect: is suffering missing, engagement does not arise.

Mentality affects the characteristics of engagement. Depending on the region, people are more willing to engage and inclined to do so. The study “Engagement Atlas 2009” identifies this aspect as well as rural and urban north-south division in the western regions (Prognos AG et al. 2009: pp. 18).

For the future development of engagement, it is important that the initial actions and activities of engagement are not restricted to special structures (groups, associations etc.). Even if the municipality may have good ideas, engaged people do not want to be bound immediately or be attached to other-directed groups or structures. Only in the case of activities, which need determined structures (e.g., for applications, acquisition of funds, etc.), associations or similar structures have to be founded. Any engagement requires clear objectives and a reasonable time frame. For many projects, it is important that engagement arises as a combination of permanent “standing” and short-term activation of potentials.

Engagement “wants to be seen”. Engaged people expect for their engagement a corresponding appreciation of their activities (including the recognition of the invested expenditure). Engaged people expect an appropriate acknowledgment from the “right” level: it may be desirable, for example, by the press, politicians, from the family, associations or special groups, but also by the public. This is variable and depends on the respective motivation.

The presence of a key stakeholder is advantageous for project-related engagement. This “care taking person” or “alpha wolf” can be characterized as a charismatic and persuasive person. S/he is accepted in the village and possibly rhetorically trained. The way of taking responsibility, s/he has learned “from the first” (family, community, school, etc.). This key stakeholder seems intrinsically motivated, while “followers” are more extrinsically motivated and adapt their activities to the specifications.
While this key stakeholder is perceived as positive, a dominant person can have a negative effect. Existing rigid association structures can slow or limit engagement as well. Other hindering factors result from human weaknesses such as pessimism and intolerance, criticism assignments or killer phrases such as "Cannot be done"/"Cannot be financed." However, absolute disinterest on the part of community, a rigid legal framework and/or lack of transparency hinder the engagement of the people.

### 3.2 Household Survey

The household survey was performed in the six villages in Lower Saxony in the north of Germany. According to Bertelsmann-Stiftung (2013), the municipality Meinersen with its village Leiferde is a “stable municipality in the environs of larger centers” (Braunschweig as a bigger city in the south-east of Lower Saxony). The city of Löningen belongs to the category “stable smaller cities and rural municipalities.” Ovelgönne, Bunde and Weener can be characterized as “Cities and towns in depressed rural regions” and the municipality of Bad Grund with its village Eisdorf is typed as “aging and small municipality with pressure to adapt”.

A return of 1,495 (9.4%) questionnaires (one per household) was achieved with a total of 15,920 distributed. The survey was guided by the question, which motivations for engagement the respondents have. A special focus was on engagement for village development and conversions. For additional details, we refer to Weitkamp (2014).

The majority of respondents are engaged civically. To an average of half of the respondents, these activities take place at their place of residence. Regional and inter-regional engagements are rather less applied. The locally grown up respondents are mostly engaged. A relationship (positive correlation) could be observed between the length of residence in the region and the length of engagement. Nevertheless, we must point out that new residents are also very involved in some places like in Ovelgönne and Leiferde. One-third of the respondents are not engaged.

Engagement establishes itself generally through spending time and labor. Large time spans were named considering the question how long the person is involved. Long activities dominate; periods indicate an average of 10 more than 30 years. 80% of the engaged people are regularly engaged. They spend 3 hours a week in the mean or 4.7 hours a week in the median, respectively. Overall, 75% of the engaged people are active more than 2 hours per week. Many respondents see themselves as providers of knowledge and ideas. Engagement is lived to have fun. Many respondents want to be part of a group or to help others or to improve their own communities. They want to be bonded or connected in groups or the community. Nevertheless, the need for self-realization plays a major role.

The location plays a special role for engagement. The municipality Eisdorf is worth mentioning. There, the structural conditions are particularly deficient, but the engagement is particularly high. This statement supports the hypothesis that engagement often emerges from the suffering—a classic avoidance motive. If people are aware of problems, they try to reduce or to eliminate them.

The willingness to engage actively in redevelopment projects is rather low, although about half of the respondents know examples of buildings that are reused after a long vacancy in the village. While some willingness for redeveloping a building for common use exist, there is only an
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extremely slight interest for privateredevelopmentprojects. This would be potentiallyfeasible fornot even 50%. In Eisdorf, with the highest level of suffering, the willingness to engage within a conversation project is the lowest. The majority would support the redevelopment by labor or by ideas. But in all villages, the largest obstacle for engagement is stated as a lack of timespecified by the profession. The Enquete-Kommission (2002b: 281) has also discovered this as main obstacle of fixed engagement. The weekly working time contains an average of 37.5 hours. Those, who mention temporal obstacles really have stated exceptionally long working and driving times with working time averagely 40 hours and travelling time on average of 50 minutes.

Asking non-engaged persons, nearly 75% are basically willing to engage in their village (24%) or maybewould be willing to engage locally (50%). In Leiferde, there is a high rate of potentially disposition (almost 90% say yes or maybe). In Eisdorf, there are only just under 65% of the potential willingly.

3.3 Case studies
Finally, good practices were examined. The study focuses on conversion projects in Lower Saxony, which were realized with the help of civic engagement. With personal and telephone interviews, the stakeholders of the processes were interviewed on motivations, aims and reasons. In addition, the effect on village development and obstacles were questioned. Overall, ten good practices and three bad practices were evaluated.

The buildings are former farmhouses or closed field offices. Individual reasons lead to the abandonment. Personal reasons are named like age, new construction, divorce, illness or a missing successor. In addition, economic reasons cause the abandonment like store closing or lack of sales. Often, the demographic change is an occasion for the abandonment.

The objects were usually vacant and neglected. The stakeholders were convinced of their activities and the engagement raised from identification with the village. The buildings needed comprehensive constructional measures, which cause high costs. High capital needs are an obstacle for smaller and less experienced groups (or even private individuals). The banks often do not offer loans because of the related risk, which is difficult to calculate. In addition, the projects needed a mix of subsidies, but the co-financing is problematic. The official request for subsidies and the associated formalities are hindrances.

The underlying motivations vary: the stakeholders want to preserve the quality of life; they prefer a public location as a meeting place. Otherwise, they want to preserve a monument for next generations. The new uses contain common uses like a village community center – often combined with a village shop. The stakeholders try to counteract the loss of infrastructure. Labor-extensive income source like renting apartments, guided tours cover the costs.

The stakeholders come together in recently formed groups with intention of realizing the new project. Often, they are established from associations as sub or working group. In all projects, the cooperation is important. Many projects benefit from a key stakeholder: A person, who has a lead function and do not fear strangers, which she or he questioned to help because of their special qualifications. Most people need a direct addressing to be engaged. Calls in newspapers, internet or so on are ineffective.
The reuse processes take time up to four years with need of preservation afterwards. A span of time over one year can be mentioned as a problem. Then, the willingness for engagement decreases. Moreover, if nothing happens for a long time, anger and confusion increase.

As additional problems of the process can be stated:
- Structural problems because of old, vacant buildings,
- Recruitment problems and the uncertainty, if the younger generations will further carry on the project,
- Sustainable operation beyond the conversation phase (fatigue of volunteers),
- Financing and subsiding especially co-financing and application writing,
- Formation of organizations with whole formalities and long processing times.

Many progressive effects can be mentioned by the projects. Often, a place for cultural life, local center or a venue could be created. The common building project sustainably strengthens the cohesion of the village, the resulting identification and the sense of community. People can do something positive for home care, which increases the attractiveness of the place (sometimes touristic motivated) and creates jobs.

Visionary people, special individuals (with leader functions) were very helpful, because they carry the projects. The support from the population and the common sense are high, members of the associations work together. The municipality takes a key role in the conversation process. They help by purchasing the lot or the real estate and by getting the planning permit. The stakeholders often do not notice this support. Costs are often shared with the municipality. Nevertheless, it can be mentioned, that the municipality can only be the initiator. The people in the village have to bear the project. Additionally, the press and media should guide the process. Transparent communication and trustful cooperation are advantageous. In addition, strokes of luck are helpful sometimes. For more details, we refer to (Weitkamp 2014).

4. Conclusions

Engagement arises from personal motives and situational circumstances. Community-oriented people want to be active in a group, have fun, and realize themselves. Hence, the call for engagement often occurs from their own environment such as family, friends, or associations. Engagement is exemplified. This is also evident in the determination that engagement usually arises at a young age. It is generally inserted in terms of time and labor. Many non-engaged people mentioned the lack of time as an obstacle.

Municipalities who want to enable engaged persons for village development and in particular for conversions should promote engagement within established groups. Examples and awareness alone will not suffice to generate engagement. Support for a conversion can only be received if it will be for common use; the benefit has to be shown. Factors like commonality and group membership can be helpful. An addressing seems to be promising if it is made via associations, families or corresponded key stakeholders.

Because an activation potential of non-engaged persons is apparent, it is important to share projects and works. Many non-engaged persons cannot afford constant support due to lack of time. Here, short manageable activities should be offered: engagement for village
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Civic development should be composed by regular support and manageable actions. In particular, for the episodic-activated are key stakeholders and organizer of special importance. However, it is to question whether someone can take over the function of the key stakeholder – either by a person in charge or even in divided functions by a group or team.

In municipalities with higher distress, a trend toward greater engagement is evident. Often purpose incentives stand in the foreground. The persons involved in avoidance motives, the identified problems should be eliminated or reduced. Here however, it is important to demonstrate success yet.

Although this is difficult in a deficient environment, it is crucial to indicate success, to identify progress and to appreciate engagement. On the one hand, the municipality itself and on the other hand, the environment of the engaged persons are encouraged. If this fails, the engagement for village development is omitted.

In summary, it can be stated that engagement must be given a certain appreciation. Engagement wants to be seen. Depending on the engaged person, the person vary, who has to express this appreciation. For someone, an appreciation of family and friends is enough, while another one expects it through a representative level, e.g. through mayors.

Future work should focus on the activation of potentially engaged citizens and businesses. In particular, there is a need for investigation, which addressing the particular group expects for their participation and what contribution can be realistically expected. Especially the latter aspect requires special attention, citizens and businesses should not feel overwhelmed with their use. Therefore, it is necessary to establish milestones and intermediate objectives for individual projects, so that a verifiable success is quickly visible.

The key motivation for continued engagement is the appreciation and the visible successes of the (last) insert.

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BIographies

Dr. Alexandra Weitkamp received her diploma (Dipl.-Ing.) in “Geodesy” at the University of Hanover in 1999. She passed the second state exam as “Graduate Civil Servant for Surveying and Real Estates” in Lower Saxony in 2001. After two-year experience at Bayer AG, she returns to Leibniz Universitaet Hannover. In 2008 received her Ph.D. in “Geodesy and Geoinformatics” at the University of Bonn. Since then, she has been postdoctoral fellow at the Geodetic Institute at the Leibniz Universitaet Hannover. Her main research interests are: stakeholders in rural and urban development, adaption of innovative evaluation methods for valuation, and decision-making methods.

Dr. Pia Steffenhagen is postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Environmental Planning at the Leibniz Universitaet Hannover since 2010. Her main research interests are: development of rural regions, civic and corporate engagement, geographic information systems in spatial and environmental planning. She received her diploma in "Environmental Sciences" at the University of Vechta in 2005. In 2010, she received her Ph.D. at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. It was financed by a scholarship from the German Federal Foundation for the Environment (DBU).
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Dr. Alexandra Weitkamp
Leibniz Universität Hannover | Geodetic Institute
Nienburger Str. 1
30167 Hanover
GERMANY
Tel. +49 (0)511 762 2406
Fax + 49 (0)511 762 2468
Email: weitkamp@gih.uni-hannover.de
Website: www.gih.uni-hannover.de

Dr. Pia Steffenhagen
Leibniz Universität Hannover | Institute of Environmental Planning
Herrenhäuser Str. 2
30419 Hanover
GERMANY
Tel. +49 (0)511 762 17950
Fax + 49 (0)511 762 5219
Email: steffenhagen@umwelt.uni-hannover.de
Website: www.umwelt.uni-hannover.de