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Rural areas in transition: Village development in the light of new structures of responsibility

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Zora Becker

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Zora Becker

RURAL AREAS IN TRANSITION – VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT IN THE LIGHT OF NEW STRUCTURES OF RESPONSIBILITY

Contents

- 1 Introduction and objectives
 - 2 Rural areas – existing challenges
 - 3 The formative power of the village community
 - 4 The funding programme for village development in Lower Saxony
 - 5 Responsibility for shaping the village living environment
 - 5.1 Conditions and differentiation of the assumption of responsibility
 - 5.2 Village development and responsibility
 - 6 Conclusions
- References

Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges of rural areas, the formative power of citizens and the funding programme for village development in Lower Saxony. The article elaborates the importance of collective responsibility in villages by means of cooperation between local political representatives, the administration and village residents in their various functions. It points out the need for further research on the assumption of responsibility; using the example of the funding programme for village development in Lower Saxony, the article pursues options for methodically supporting these processes in future.

Keywords

Village development – responsibility – participation – civic engagement – planning process – rural areas

1 Introduction and objectives

Actively shaping one's own living environment and assuming responsibility: the village development funding programme presents an opportunity to create suitable responsibility structures and framework conditions for this purpose in villages.

Life in rural areas is undergoing change and facing comprehensive challenges. Political, economic and spatial planning interventions are used in an attempt to address this. However, these have been and often continue to be funded, steered and planned by external actors (Brake/Klein 1997). Current research sees a need for change in this respect, because in order to retain the village as an attractive place to live and work (Harteisen 2016), stakeholders in rural areas must jointly assume responsibility

(Ritzinger 2011; Harteisen/Eigner-Thiel 2016). These reflections focus on the formative power (Krambach 2013) of village residents and the question of preserving the local quality of life. Quality of life is created not only from the availability of social, technical and cultural infrastructures and existing individual resources but also from social relationships and a lively village community (Harteisen/Eigner-Thiel 2016). The lack or disappearance of these elements influences the current and future development of villages and emphasises the need for action. As a result, local people are needed who, as affected persons, are willing to contribute to the active shaping of their living environment and to assume responsibility. The academic discourse about the assumption of responsibility is still very much in its infancy, whereas in practice, responsibility is already being assumed by civil society in diverse ways. Civic engagement has great significance for rural areas (*BMFSFJ* [Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth] 2016) and is manifested, for example, in voluntary fire services, village shops or resident's buses. As well as local people, support structures such as funding programmes also play a role for rural areas, as they can help to shape the development of villages by financial incentives and by supporting cooperation. Various questions arise with regard to cooperation and joint responsibility: What responsibility do members of a village have for shaping their living environment? What might innovative solutions for the joint shaping of the living environment look like? What role can the funding instrument of village development play as an instrument for planning and stability, and to what extent must it be further developed for this purpose? My PhD research is based on these questions. Within the framework of the village development funding instrument in Lower Saxony, my research includes an investigation into whether village development requires new methods and a new substantive direction with regard to the formative power of residents and other structures of responsibility in order to be able to respond to current and future challenges.

The present article aims to demonstrate the need for further development of the funding programme with regard to the formative power of residents and the examination of structures of responsibility, and to emphasise the specific research need. The themes of responsibility and village development are addressed from a regional studies and planning perspective. The article begins by discussing the challenges of rural areas, the formative power of residents and the village development funding programme. It then identifies the conditions for the assumption of responsibility and considers them in relation to the process of village development. On this basis, the significance of the joint assumption of responsibility in villages will be elaborated. At the same time, questions will be raised regarding changes to methodical process support.

2 Rural areas – existing challenges

A closer look at life in the country shows that *the* rural area or *the* village do not exist; instead, there is a broad range of different starting situations and developments. According to the definition in the *Land Atlas (Landatlas)*, not only villages but also many small and medium-sized towns count as rural areas. According to this demarcation, 57% of the population of the Federal Republic of Germany therefore live in rural

areas, which make up 91% of the country's territory (BMEL [Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture] 2016). Based on this knowledge, it is surprising that rural areas still play a subordinate role, not only in public but also in research on the structuring of planning processes and on responsibility. On this basis, it is worth taking a separate look at rural areas, since the current developments have different effects on urban and rural regions and require different approaches.

Rural areas face significant challenges connected with demographic, economic and social change. Whereas dwindling populations, the ageing of society and migration occur in all types of space, individual localities are subject to different specific problems. Acting on the basis of individual cases therefore seems appropriate. An indication of this is the different extent to which technical and social infrastructure is dwindling. Many villages show a deficit with regard to local public transport, schools and nurseries, or retail trade (Einig 2015). With regard to the low birthrates and the emigration tendencies from rural to metropolitan areas and cities, the issue of vacancy, which often goes hand in hand with unattractive village centres, is very present. In connection with the ageing society, the question is also raised as to how care measures can be guaranteed in future despite the infrastructure problems. Changed demands in relation to housing and work can be identified as a result of the change in values in society (Helmle/Kuczera 2015). Lifestyles change and influence the shape of leisure time and mobility. A high level of commuting and a form of everyday life which is characterised by having little available time beyond unavoidable activities pose challenges here. This also leads to a change in the willingness to become involved. For example, people get involved in specific projects, but not so much on a long term basis (Helmle/Kuczera 2015; Becker 1997).

In summary, individual needs and interests now characterise life in villages. Despite this, certain particularities of village life often remain intact. The sense of community, close contact with neighbours and nature are just some of these aspects which constitute quality of life and which are valued (Harteisen/Eigner-Thiel 2016). In this context, a discussion and consideration of participation and responsibility in village development proves important.

3 The formative power of the village community

With a view to the structural change in rural areas, targeted joint activity by residents and social cohesion are important in order to retain quality of life and enable sustainable development. This is shown, for example, in the *WohnLokal* pilot study (Wolter/Kaiser 2018), in which joint activities and personal contributions which lead to a sense of community were identified as success factors.

Empirical research shows that the capacity for self-determination is significant for residents of rural areas (Magel/Ritzinger/Groß 2009; Krambach 2013). The concept of empowerment encompasses the ability to 'take existing interests into one's own hands and shape them independently and responsibly' (Hill 2008:17). The formative aspects and people's pro-active engagement are at the forefront here. At the same time, the traditional relationships between all participants is called into question to

the extent that the focus is on cooperation and the joint development of solutions, rather than on solutions suggested by external experts (Lenz 2009). Empowerment manifests itself in some villages in the implementation of innovative endogenous projects and successful cooperation between local people. Some of the research for my PhD thesis takes place in the village region of Lower Saxony known as ‘from Bierde to Wittlohe’. The self-organised village shop in Otersen exemplifies the potential which can be developed by successful cooperation. This also shows how various challenges can be overcome – from how things are organised to stacking the shelves. The joint networks which emerge make use of resources and the scope for action that residents create for themselves.

This civil society potential of the village community with regard to joint action offers an opportunity for development processes such as village development, which, however, require a stronger focus and integration. Initially, however, this raises the question of the extent to which one can still talk of a village community these days, in view of changing lifestyles in villages. Coexistence in villages is characterised by the lack of young people and a large proportion of older people. This trend contrasts with the relevance that is still assigned to the village community. It is associated with good neighbourliness, contact density and manageable social relationships (Krambach 2013; Henkel 2012). Very different forms and stages of development of village communities can be seen in current developments. In addition, several communities may also coexist which are not differentiated by spatial delimitation but, for example, by common interests (Vogelgesang/Kopp/Jacob et al. 2018). The formation of village communities is also distinguished by the existing social relationships between the residents. These are positively influenced by civic engagement, a number of social activities, active village associations and self-organisation. Here, self-organisation refers to the possibility for village residents to be able to steer, shape and organise things within a village (Krambach 2013).

Overall, the importance of interaction in a village is revealed – regardless of how exactly the village community is organised. According to Kurt Krambach (2013), the future viability of villages depends on the people and the ‘power of civil society’ within the locality (Krambach 2013: 43). The challenges that affect life in rural areas today contribute to the emergence of lively village communities in some localities. In these cases, perceived changes and restrictions lead to an impetus for people to change and shape things through their own efforts. In such examples – which include the aforementioned Otersen village shop – the local residents discover their formative power and assume responsibility. They make decisions of their own accord and gather experiences which lead to empowerment. The importance of cooperation in the village and the potential which can be opened up by becoming active together can also be seen in villages which have participated in competitions such as ‘Our village has a future’ (*Unser Dorf hat Zukunft*) (BMELV [Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection] 2011).

In order to harness this potential formative power of cooperation between local people for village development, it is necessary to reflect on the participatory processes which take place. It should be asked to what extent the formative power of members of the village is incorporated. The role of local residents in participatory processes and

the seriousness of joint solutions and decision-making are essential in order to find a common basis for the shaping of future development. This makes it possible for local political representatives, the administration and residents to assume responsibility jointly in their various functions and offices.

4 The funding programme for village development in Lower Saxony

In Lower Saxony, local authorities can apply to the Lower Saxony Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (*Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Ernährung, Landwirtschaft und Verbraucherschutz*) for village development funding. In villages which make successful applications, ‘planning, implementation support and measures are subsidised which initiate comprehensive private and public regeneration plans’ (Office for Regional Land Development Leine-Weser 2018). The village development funding programme is an instrument used to initiate processes at a local level and to jointly create a village development plan for the future shaping of the village. Several villages come together in village regions in order to pursue a common strategy development. The level of an individual village has been recognised as being frequently too small for strategic developments. Based on the stipulations of the Guideline on the Granting of Aids for Integrated Rural Development (ZILE 2017), a joint concept for development is created in the village regions whereby relevant issues are identified and initial proposals for measures are outlined. As well as the collaborative approaches, the funding programme includes the possibility of private subsidies – for example for energy regeneration in houses.

The village development funding programme in Lower Saxony entails the discussion of questions like ‘How do we want to live in future?’, ‘What are our local challenges here?’ and ‘How can we respond to them?’. Participatory approaches play an important role. In the process of village development over several years, an exchange of ideas between local politicians, the administration and local residents about the shaping of the village is encouraged. Likewise, local businesses, churches, associations, etc. may be involved. On the basis of the different spatial circumstances and the endogenous potential, joint discussions are held to decide on important fields of action and necessary projects. The moderating and advisory support by a planning office supports the process of combining various existing interests and leveraging potential. Diverse forms of participation are used in order to involve residents. Further training is also offered for interested participants, such as village moderation. A clear understanding of the roles of the participants is advantageous for cooperation. A peculiarity of rural areas, with their limited number of people, is that one person may hold different functions or offices at the same time (Born 2017). For example, one person may at the same time be the chair of an association, a member of the local council and also be interested in the topic as a private individual. When collaborating, it can be important to make one’s own role clear during discussions. The village community, with its views of how future life in the villages should be shaped, also plays an important role in participation. This is clearly shown in the targeted attempts to involve groups such as young people, farmers or elderly people, who are often not represented by active persons, in the process. The opportunities offered by the process are also shown in potential new structures of collaboration between publicly acting persons and local

residents. Examples of this include the establishment of long-term working groups (Born 2009) or overarching strategic committees. Building on this cooperation, the question is raised as to how far the shaping of the participatory process must change in order to deepen it and to support a joint assumption of responsibility for the future shaping of the village as a living environment.

5 Responsibility for shaping the village living environment

When considering the joint assumption of responsibility, the following question arises: what responsibility can and should the residents take for the shaping of their living environment in the villages? This question arises in the context of the discussion about public service provision, the existing expectations of people who live in the village, and the actual service performance by the state in rural areas. Provision of public services encompasses the securing of public, comprehensive access to existential services and goods at socially acceptable prices and in the acceptable minimum quality (Kersten/Neu/Vogel 2015). Technical and social services are included here. State responsibility for guaranteeing the provision of public services includes the provision of services and also the provision of the infrastructure needed for this. According to the spatial planning report, the provision of public services refers to 'the public safeguarding of a range of selected goods and services which are classified as essential by the legislator' (BBSR [Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development] 2012: 31). In rural areas, local authorities must fulfil their municipal obligations despite often declining tax revenues. The narrow financial margin results in a loss in the provision of voluntary tasks such as support for libraries or open-air swimming pools, since even maintaining minimum standards causes problems for many local authorities. Funding programmes such as village development in Lower Saxony may offer financial grants for this along with the option of creating a framework or ideas for solutions for the future development of the villages.

5.1 Conditions and differentiation of the assumption of responsibility

In the basic consideration of the assumption of responsibility, various conditions become evident. Responsibility is firstly a basic ethical stance which includes the willingness to collaborate in order to create something 'good' together (Banzhaf 2017). In addition, responsibility is also an organisational and formative principle of social practice. Stakeholders today are not responsible *per se*; rather, a distinction must be made between different forms of responsibility. Ethical responsibility in the sense of taking responsibility for consequences must be distinguished from legal responsibility in the sense of the assumption of liability and from sociological responsibility in the sense of the acceptance of tasks (Heidbrink 2006). The ambiguity means that it is important for the future to specify who is responsible in a particular situation for what, with regard to whom and why (Banzhaf 2017).

With regard to the obligatory tasks and the voluntary tasks of local authorities, accountability exists on the part of the state, since 'local affairs' (section 28(2) of the Basic Law) must be guaranteed. If, because of budget constraints, new and innovative

solutions are sought in order to find a way to maintain the village as an attractive living environment together with all those concerned, a certain scope for action and decision-making must be established. A concomitant surrendering of responsibility by the local authorities requires discussion. Competence responsibility entailed by the assumption of particular tasks or roles by members of the village plays an important complementary role in this sense, particularly in those areas where no precise regulations or external stipulations exist, such as voluntary commitment (Heidbrink 2017). In practice, it is evident that residents are already assuming responsibility for the common good by their commitment in diverse ways, by contributing to social cohesion, generating social capital, or even contributing to providing public services. Thus, at the local level of the village, co-responsibility for the common good is not just discussed but is often already being enacted. The voluntary assumption of responsibility can be found in villages in the form of diverse civic engagement and association structures. One established example is voluntary fire services (Steinführer 2015). Village shops, too, not only present a form of civic engagement but also the assumption of responsibility for local services for the members of a village. The assumption of responsibility appears in various dimensions in these examples. Firstly, there is a responsibility for certain tasks which are assumed by individuals, such as selling goods in the village shop. Secondly, there is a common assumption of responsibility by the group in relation to all persons in the village by making local provision possible in the village.

In addition, motivation and the interests of the respective persons play a role in the assumption of responsibility. The perceived immaterial or material gain may be decisive for a willingness to contribute (Kiehlbrei/Magel 2012). It is also important to note that this is not about a transfer of responsibility by others but about self-determined assumption which is based on the conviction of being able to help oneself and on empowerment, for example. An important aspect is the voluntary assumption of responsibility by residents. In addition, not everyone is equally capable of assuming responsibility, since this is linked to conditional and generic conditions. The conditional requirements are freedom to act, causality – i.e. the ability to have an effective influence on consequences – and intentionality as well as knowledge of consequences. The generic conditions include developing the abilities and competences needed for responsibility and ultimately the assumption of responsibility (Heidbrink 2017). These prerequisites are often met in practice by so-called *draft horses* (Damm/Dähner/Slupina et al. 2017): particularly committed persons who possess these competences in order to initiate projects and encourage others to participate. However, this also means that further training measures for the future discussion and assumption of responsibility are relevant, particularly when activating previously less committed local residents.

The assumption of responsibility always plays a role when there is a possibility of influencing something. However, this can quickly lead to overwork, which is why competences should be clearly defined and why a ‘reflection on the limits of the human capacity for responsibility’ is necessary (Banzhaf 2017: 163). With regard to village residents, this means that addressing what is manageable is important for a continual assumption of responsibility. This can be seen not only in the discussion about which tasks the local authority will still be able to perform in future, but also in

the advantage of having full-time officers responsible for volunteer commitment. The above-mentioned limits play an exceptional role, particularly for approaches aimed at making processes permanent. In summary, the assumption of responsibility requires differentiation. There is an accountability on the part of the state which is contrasted with the voluntary assumption of responsibility. Responsibility can be assumed by various stakeholders, alone or jointly, and for many different reasons. It is important that the stakeholders have the necessary capabilities and that corresponding spaces of action and possibility are created.

5.2 Village development and responsibility

With regard to the assumption of responsibility in the context of village development, the participants in the planning process show an interest and an initial willingness to assume joint responsibility for the shaping of their living environment. They develop project ideas on the basis of endogenous local potential, as well as a long-term perspective for development possibilities and limits (Magel/Ritzinger/Großetal. 2007). Jointly, they identify fields of action and form working groups (Brake/Klein 1997). The funding programme typically intends for the municipality to collaborate with local residents and take up the resulting ideas and proposals. When considering a collaboration or potential future cooperation, the various persons involved in the process and their attitude towards the assumption of responsibility play an important role. As well as different motivations, there are differences in power and resources. One's own perception of one's role in the village development process is just as relevant here as creating the space for action and enablement which might mitigate these differences. Consequently, it seems that this reveals the limits and possibilities offered by the assumption of responsibility in the context of the village development process. An example of a power difference would be if the local authority has to agree to the jointly drafted village development plan, as this means that it has decision-making power and is therefore able to create spaces for action. The planners who moderate and advise the process of village development are able to influence the collaboration. On the one hand, they shape the framework of exchange within which the various interests are addressed; on the other, they have the role of mediators in situations of conflict. They can take on a supportive role in the exchange between the municipality and population, and constitute an important coordination point for exchanges between the different villages.

There is thus a need for research into the perception of responsibility, particularly with regard to the various perspectives of the residents and planners, as well as into how to bring these together. The question also arises as to what existing structures of responsibility in village development processes look like and how a joint assumption of responsibility on the basis of them might be structured. This necessitates a discussion of the options for activating the assumption of responsibility, and of the corresponding conditions and possibilities for stabilising this in the long term. This reveals a need to change the planning supporting processes and its methods in order to support a joint assumption of responsibility. This need for research will be taken up in the course of the PhD thesis. To do so, qualitative research will encompass interviews conducted with planners who are highly experienced in village development. In addi-

tion, focus group discussions will take place with participants from two village regions. The various perspectives will then be brought together.

6 Conclusions

The nascent academic and political discussion about sharing responsibility in village development opens up an exciting field concerning the question of how the shaping of life in rural areas might look in the future. In practice, associations and various types of commitment guarantee that several aspects will be maintained. The assumption of responsibility for this may comprise different dimensions. Specific tasks such as driving a residents' bus are supplemented by an overarching responsibility which is assumed by residents coming together to improve the local transport situation. In order for local residents to become active in this way, they must *'want to be, able to be and allowed to be'* (Ködelpeter/Nitschke 2008: 17). The village development funding programme offers diverse starting points to address the assumption of responsibility. The research project will examine this in depth and collect qualitative empirical data on the structures of responsibility in village development and the possibilities and conditions of a joint assumption of responsibility.

The willingness of local people to take on the future shaping of village life constitutes an important starting condition for this. Firstly, this affects residents who use their leisure time in order to make a contribution. Secondly, however, interest is needed on the part of local political representatives and the administration in a collaboration which takes the role of residents seriously. If village development is regarded purely as a funding instrument, the potential formative power of the village community and of the joint assumption of responsibility cannot be exploited. However, if there is an active village community and an interested local authority, this provides a good basis for reflecting on new structures of cooperation within the village development process. Further research should discuss how far the structuring of the planning process and the methods used are suitable for this, as well as possible adjustments or expansions to the process. It is important not only to encourage processes for the assumption of responsibility but also to provide them with a suitable structure for cooperation, while respecting the limits of what is achievable, creating space for enablement and making a contribution towards long-term stability.

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