



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report July 2011 (Germany) – Coping with shrinking rural communities

#### *Adapting to demographic change and improving the life in rural areas – Model regions tackling demographic change and competition results of 'Liveable rural areas'*

The Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development is ultimately the highest co-ordinating authority for all matters of planning, which is at the local level the responsibility of the local authorities in Germany. The local planning system is fairly unified across the country, however regional planning matters can be organised differently in the *Länder*, although everywhere a clear planning infrastructure exists. The Federal Ministry through its technical agencies also undertakes research, as well as implementing projects dealing with current issues such as regeneration and development of urban areas, as well as the overarching theme of demographic change and how to enable places and communities to cope with it.

Since 1996, an approach called MORO (*Modellvorhaben der Raumordnung* – pilots for spatial planning) has been promoting a more practical approach through actions and projects rather than programmes and plans. Within this are contained numerous model projects and competitions to find best practice approaches. The umbrella initiative for improving rural infrastructure and services included model regions (*Region schafft Zukunft* – Demographic change: regions make their own future) which ran from 2007 to 2011, as well as a competition called 'Menschen und Erfolge' (people and successes). The competition has been concluded at the end of July 2011 and highlighted a myriad of small-scale projects which ultimately aim to improve the lives of people in rural areas. The aim of the competition was:

- To pay tribute to the good work and the effort invested by the people running the projects
- Support and promote innovative, sustainable ideas (relying on the creativity of citizens!)
- Set in train processes to make rural areas more resilient which will develop their own dynamic and become sustainable
- To build networks

The competition was structured into four topical areas, which together encompass all areas of people's lives:

- 1) Securing technical and social infrastructure in a sustainable way – this includes mobility and transport, energy and water supply as well as dealing with waste, but also such areas as education and health.  
For a good quality of life in rural areas, access to modern telecommunication services, efficient and environmentally sound energy provision, transport which is not wholly reliant on access to a private car, attractive education and child care services are equally as important as the availability of health care as well as housing in which to grow old. Long distances, low population density, rising quality expectations as well as the need to reduce costs are all pressures which necessitate new concepts to satisfy people's needs for social and technical services in rural areas.
- 2) Developing an infrastructure to support innovative business activities – the future of rural areas depends on their economic development. Securing the quality and availability of private-sector services is equally a part of this, as is the development of modern approaches in tourism, agriculture or traditional craft-based trades. Redeveloping former agricultural buildings and facilities can contribute, as well as the provision of innovative training to integrate people into the job market, including re-training and further qualification to meet the needs of local employers.
- 3) Improving community life in rural areas – especially smaller towns and rural communities often are proud of their active community spirit. In order to maintain and improve this, basic infrastructure has to be in place, such as sports facilities, as well as those for culture and all those different clubs German people are fond of belonging to. There is also a need to support social networks, communications and the exchange of information. Help to cope with individual difficulties and facilities assisting integration of all residents into society and inter-generational exchange are needed in rural communities as well in order to augment traditional community life. If there is a specific need, new forms of housing and living can also be a suitable response to demographic change in rural areas.
- 4) Strengthen cultural and historical heritage in rural areas – agricultural landscapes developed over centuries with their regional-specific architecture are the building blocks for a distinct regional identity. This cultural heritage is not only vital for the people who live there, but also indispensable to develop tourism that is appropriate for the region. Furthermore, in order to protect natural resources and maintain slowly grown settlements, re-use of waste land and out-of-use buildings is very often the best solution. In order to protect historical buildings and cultural assets, many people and organisations have to become engaged.

More than five hundred projects from all regions of Germany registered for the competition and were profiled in short entries on the dedicated competition website, thereby creating in itself a library of good practice in rural areas. There were four categories of entries: from individuals and families, from citizen groups and

associations, from businesses and regional associations, and from local authorities themselves. The largest number of entries, over one third, was submitted by citizen groups. The competition was initiated by the Federal Ministry, but it also was supported by the German Association of Counties and the German Association of Municipalities, which both were represented on the jury selecting the award-winners.

Out of these many examples, 15 were awarded prizes and there were also six commendations. The jury said that it was very difficult to make a choice among so many good examples. Five very different projects will be introduced as examples.

Award-winning best practice under category 1 – ‘improving service for residents: planning for health care provision in Hersfeld-Rotenburg (Hesse) through the establishment of a support network’

The county (*Kreis*) Hersfeld-Rotenburg lies in the eastern area of Hesse, very nearly in the geographical centre of Germany and is composed mainly of small size towns, of which the biggest is the county seat of Bad Hersfeld with just over 30,000 inhabitants. The county is composed of 20 local authorities, of which four have the status of cities. (Bebra has 13,000 as has Rotenburg an der Fulda, and Herringen has 7,500; the other municipalities are all between 1,500 and 5,500; bringing the total population of the county to 122,000.) The county is shrinking and has acknowledged that dealing with demographic change is its greatest challenge, but is embracing it instead of pursuing futile policies of growth; employing a ‘coordinator for the future’ and having regard to demographic change in all its policies. It has become clear that basic medical care through family doctors is endangered, as a number of GPs are due to retire in the next years. Currently there are 92 single GP surgeries which are responsible for primary care. In order to assure that enough young doctors get the right education as well as support to be able to chose to practice as a GP, Hersfeld-Rotenburg has build a strategic network, in which the county cooperates with the county hospitals, the association of doctors in Hesse, and practising GPs to offer young doctors the tailored support they need, which also may include monetary incentives. In particular, in order to support female doctors who aim to combine family with a career, options include part time work or sharing a surgery. This strategy has just begun, and it remains to be seen if it will be successful.

In the second category – ‘infrastructure for innovative business activities’ - falls the provision with high-speed internet, which is still patchy in rural areas, as it is not profitable for the big commercial providers to set up the infrastructure. Across Germany, there are quite a number of innovative solutions to the problem. As a good practice example, a not-for-profit voluntary association in a rural area in Thuringia which provides wireless broadband access to residents, businesses and organisations across settlements in the area has won the award as an example demonstrating how it is possible to access modern technology without needing public subsidy. The model of ‘Landnetz e.V.’ works by monthly subscriptions to the association, which installs the necessary technology once enough interested people in one location have signed up. However users bear responsibility for the necessary

equipment used at home, and depending on location there may be further costs involved. The association exists since 2005, and has been so successful that in its area there are not many blind spots left.

In the third category – ‘improving community life in rural areas’ – the initiative to take over the management of a local pool in Zorge was awarded a prize. Zorge is a village of 1,000 people belonging to the administrative association of Walkenried (total of 4,600 inhabitants) in Lower Saxony, in an area that is richly forested and renowned for its clean air. The pool in question was established in 1935 and is a much loved feature of local life. However financial difficulties of the local authority threatened closure – and a local citizen association formed to protect the facility and keep it open for children and the community. Through the acquisition of sponsoring and grants from outside the local authority, it was possible to technically update the pool and 50,000 hours of unpaid labour of the members of the association meant that the pool could celebrate its 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010 and continue to be open to members of the community as well as visitors.

Under the fourth category – ‘strengthen cultural and historical heritage of a local area’ – an initiative of the local authority Hiddenhausen (20,000 inhabitants, North-Rhine Westphalia) to incentivise young families to buy older houses within the area rather than build new ones on the outskirts received the award. The costs of new build are much clearer than those which arise from buying and renovating older buildings. In order to aim for compact, well populated inner city areas rather than allow further suburbanisation, this initiative tries to clarify the cost associated with renovating older buildings (at least 25 years old) and make this an attractive proposition. For a report on the state of the building and necessary building works, up to 1,500 Euro grant are available, as are up to 6,000 Euro grant over six years per family. There are no particular conditions about who can apply for the grant, but there is a special supplement for each child of 300 Euro/year. The project started in 2007, after a report about the likely demographic change in the region, with support from the whole council. In its four years of operation, there are now 150 families in the programme. The annual budget is 140,000 Euro for 2011, and 170,000 for 2012. The idea has proved so popular that in 2010, for the first time in many years more people came to live in Hiddenhausen than moved away.

As an example of a commended project comes the initiative of a dentist in the Uckermark region in Brandenburg to provide mobile services to patients within a 30 km radius, combining prevention and treatment with social integration.

The prizes were awarded at the ‘Demographic Conference 2011’, which was held by the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of June in Berlin. At the same conference, the follow-up to the now finished project of model regions for demographic change which ran between 2007 and 2011 (as reported in Monthly Report July 2009) also started. Out of 156 applications from larger local authorities (counties or groups of local authorities), 50 were selected to begin work on a concept for a ‘Master plan for vital services’, for which they will receive 4,000 Euros grant each. These concepts will be submitted for evaluation

again under a competition format, and 30 will be selected to develop their own strategy, and how to implement it. It forms the roll-out of a technique pioneered already in some of the model regions. Developing a regional strategy for technical infrastructure such as water and energy, but also social and personal services such as healthcare, education and old-age care is a discursive process involving not only the elected councils and their members and the administrations, but as many residents as possible and all those organisations involved with providing services, be they public or private. This programme is scheduled to run from 2011 to 2014, with 6.5 million Euros spent on it, with selected projects receiving between 60,000 and 180,000 Euros. It is also envisaged that money will be available after the project phase has finished for further development and implementation.

*Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLGC or CLAIR.*