



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report July 2009 (Germany) - Projects on demographic change: East German projects report on progress; extension to West German regions

In summer 2007, the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs started the project 'Demographic change – regions make their own future', against the background of rapid depopulation, which affects particularly the East German regions, but also some cities and areas in the West. In July 2007, after a competition two regions were selected to exemplary start projects which on one hand try to counteract the development which sees especially young people leave the region, and on the other hand adapt to the changed conditions in areas such as basic service provision. The area called 'Stettin Lagoon', which is located in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania in the north-east of Germany, bordering on Poland. Two counties, Ostvorpommern and Uecker-Randow, form this region. The other region is located in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, where the two counties Mansfeld-Südharz and Kyffhäuserkreis together constitute the region called Southern Harz – Kyffhäuser. Interestingly, this region straddles two Länder. These regions aim to develop concepts which take given regional strengths into account in adapting to the current situation. Areas in question are the development of skills which have a future and establishing life-long learning cycles, develop the latent regional economic potential and adapt the basic service infrastructure to the needs of the people. Aims also include the establishment of structures for daily life which cater for the needs of both families and older people, better transport connections, more voluntary engagement and a firm regional identity.

The developed strategies and implemented projects will serve as a learning example for many other regions, as it is not only East German regions which are struggling with a shrinking population. Therefore, two years into the programme in April 2009, two regions in West Germany were selected as model regions as well: Nordfriesland, a large county on the North Sea Coast, and the county of Werra-Meißner in Hessen, which is geographically quite close to the Southern Harz-Kyffhäuser region.

These model projects which aim to follow a double-pronged strategy in counteracting the demographic trends as best as possible, but also adapt to the given situation rather than thinking that things can be completely turned around, are based on closely co-ordinated action between the federal level, the Länder and the local authorities involved. The federal ministry has allocated 5.7 million Euros for the projects, which includes the actual local

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projects as well as the management of the approach and the information exchange which is a vital part of it.

For the successful implementation of such a large-scale model approach, efficient regional structures for organisation and decision making as well as for implementation are needed. Consequently, in every region a regional steering group was established. This regional steering group is supported by the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs, the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning (BBR), and an external project assistance group which is comprised by academics and practitioners.

The two regions selected first are following a similar approach by concentrating on the following six areas:

- Regional labour market and training and skills initiatives
- Regional economy
- Transport infrastructure and mobility
- Social welfare and support for families
- New forms of housing and living together
- Cultural and regional identity

Some projects will be specific to the locations they are in, but others are larger scale and will be implemented in both regions.

For example, under regional labour market and training and skills initiatives, in the Stettin Lagoon region an already established training institution developed more modular courses targeted at 15 to 25 year olds in order to make them more employable and respond to the skills needs of local employers in the area. One problem in depopulating areas is the increasing dearth of skilled personnel for businesses in many fields, and training people is of paramount importance. The experiences in the Stettin Lagoon region with this approach will be considered in the establishment of a new training facility of this kind in the Southern Harz- Kyffhäuser region.

In the 'social welfare and support for families' category, projects aim to see the increasing number of older people as a chance and not as a burden. The aim is to engage older people and harness their potential for new forms of living together in a community. The town of Torgelow (also located within the Stettin Lagoon region) is developing a master plan for achieving the aim of stronger engagement of older people, especially those who are characterised as the 'young old', those who are in their 60s. To this purpose, the town and those voluntary and charitable organisations active in the town have come together to discuss with experts and the support of a specialist consultancy what tangible steps are necessary. It has been agreed that the plan should follow three main approaches: first, to communicate better about problems and make people aware of these and discuss possible solutions, secondly to engage and involve first and foremost the 'young old' and thirdly, to co-operate between local authorities. Plans of this kind will have lessons for many other depopulating communities, especially those which studies have shown to have a low level of voluntary engagement (refer to Monthly Report 2/2009).

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In the category 'new forms of housing and living together', there are a number of similar projects in both regions. The issue in many smaller towns is that through depopulation and re-organisation of local government structures many public buildings have become redundant. By trying to make buildings such as unused schools, hospitals or stations which are very often located in strategic central positions within localities into multi-purpose facilities which provide such amenities as shops, surgeries, post office or banking facilities. Through stabilising local town centres and establishing multi-function service points, the quality of life for people in those areas will be assured.

In all, the two first model regions have more than 25 projects between them, of which some also have several sites. Some will be finalised in autumn of this year, while others will still be ongoing after the three year-long official project has run its course

The two new regions from West Germany which have been included in the programme in April 2009 have whittled down the fields in which projects are undertaken to three, which have proved themselves to be of most importance in the earlier pilots. These are:

- Establishing a master plan for vital services in the region – adapting infrastructure to changed conditions
- Improve housing conditions in smaller towns to provide housing both for older people and for families
- Particular beacon projects to support innovation and expansion in areas which have potential

Also, during the process of selecting the first pilot regions, other counties also submitted interesting proposals, and some have been selected to serve as 'comparative regions'. In these four areas, specific projects in different areas that have been selected in the pilot regions are supported, and the learning that proves transferable from the first pilots will be further employed in these regions.

On the 30th of June 2009, a national conference hosted by the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Affairs in Berlin brought many of the actors engaged in this project together, to discuss outcomes and share knowledge on the progress of this large-scale approach. The federal government commissioner for the new federal states (ie for East Germany) who oversees this project emphasised again the need for a better co-ordinated approach between federal, state and local levels, as demographic change affects all areas – accordingly policy in the areas of the economy, education and training, spatial and town planning as well as health and the family have to be included.

The model projects already seem to have made an impact in many areas, but it is also noteworthy that this has happened only through an injection of considerable sums of public money, and it is to be expected that without this, local authorities would not have been able to initiate many of the projects.

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