Five theses for the preservation and promotion of sustainable rural structures for young people

1. **Every community needs easily accessible spaces for meeting and communication. If the community is to avoid exclusion, this must also be the case with regard to the spaces.**

It is very important to have meeting spaces that are accessible to everyone and that are used on a permanent basis by people who are respected and accepted in society, as well as those who belong to marginalized groups, but who all strive as actively as possible to be inclusive and open. Because they can all too easily be identified as a kind of "territory of another social group from which an insurmountable distance is felt." Once this reputation has become entrenched, these spaces can hardly be returned to their original purpose.

We see these spaces being developed dynamically among young people at bus stops, in parking lots and other places that "belong to everyone and are used by everyone" and that are not infrastructurally designed to be used by larger groups and society as a whole.

The purpose of enabling open meeting spaces that promote exchange and organization is to counteract social segregation, to make minority needs more easily publicly recognized and to avoid or counteract (further) exclusion in the future - in this way they contribute to promoting democracy and reducing factors that lead to emigration.

Just as the large, targeted spaces are needed, there is also a need for small, non-threshold and perhaps even more everyday meeting spaces that make and maintain diversity "normal" – and thus the basic willingness to meet "others".

As a *best practice example,* we got to know the [inclusive village shop in Abterode](), where a person with a disability works together with a person without a disability: This offers the person with some support needs the opportunity to remain employed in the village community or even to move to the countryside and come into contact with the local people. For everyone else, this offers an everyday experience of diversity. [The lack of such seemingly banal options is increasingly having negative consequences at a societal level.]

As a *negative example,* we heard a story about experiences from youth work in Eschwege: Here, an attempt at youth participation led by educators with a focus on marginalized young people had led to the meeting place soon being stigmatized by the majority of young people as a place for outsiders and subsequently avoided. In addition, in the discussion with a social worker who presented the project, no critical awareness of their own work and the pedagogical top-down approach was visible.

2. **Public transport is the bloodstream of rural areas: when it pulsates, life flourishes. When it disappears, young people and young families in particular move away.**

Public transport is the basis of any physical participation that is not tied to a (parental) car and the ability and willingness to drive.

Without good transport links, young people from economically disadvantaged families or those where the necessary time flexibility or parental willingness are lacking are thrown back on their village and the few peers there. This hits those who live in difficult conditions at home or who are outsiders particularly hard.

[The same applies to all other age groups without a car or the possibility to drive, which is especially Refugees and people with disabilities are often excluded as entire groups.]

Anyone who campaigns for improvements in public transport in rural areas is not only committed to fairer access , but also to a broader range of active participation and co-determination, for example when this requires participation in meetings or committees. Physical presence facilitates the necessary social contact and relationship building as a basis for trust, cooperation and collaboration. Sustainable local social organisation of common concerns is built on good public transport, because active presence is the basis for active participation: it enables the perception of gaps and needs as well as serious interest in and commitment to improving rural structures. This in turn influences the self-(efficacy) experiences and self-image of individuals living in rural areas and thus their future behaviour, and consequently their expectations and thus their behaviour, including in other areas. **As a consequence, we see public transport that satisfies needs as an essential factor in a vibrant democracy.**

The same applies to access to areas of health care, education, culture and social affairs, supplies and personal needs: If the basics are not accessible in a place, people cannot/do not want to live there.

Public transport that satisfies needs is one of the most important attractive factors for living in a village, especially among young people, because it is a means to most ends. (Unfortunately, the focus is often only on the ends, while accessibility is overlooked.)

As a best practice example , we got to know "Sprinti ", an on-demand service in the Hanover region that supplements scheduled services : With an app, travel offers to and from individual addresses can be planned and booked all day and at weekends, also at night, while needs such as booster seats or space for luggage can be specified directly.

As a negative example, we have experienced the situation in Gurro, where there is only one bus in the morning, at lunchtime and in the afternoon, and only twice at weekends. Here, families usually leave the place when the children start attending secondary school - what remains are mainly senior citizens and holidaymakers who increasingly lack the infrastructure maintained by working people. Neighbouring villages often have no bus connection at all - they become ghost villages and tourist resorts.

> **3. Groups of people who are familiar with each other and who show solidarity have an easier time in rural areas and can therefore be good pioneers for families and individuals to revitalize or stabilize rural areas.**

Effective and sustainable ways to more actively counter rural exodus in a region lie in targeted community organisation:

One option, for example, is for a group of active people to move to the region of increasing vacancy and decay , in order to encourage others to follow suit. It is important that a group comes first, in order to be able to more easily compensate for the shortcomings that have already arisen in the region and the difficulties of starting over. It is best if they know each other well enough to support each other in solidarity and reliably through the first crises. Then they can start to build social networks and, together with long-established residents , identify needs, initiate the reconstruction of fragmented infrastructure, design processes that bring together deficits and utopias in order to actively create better living conditions and make these living spaces attractive and accessible again for individuals and families who would otherwise move away or not come to the village due to deficits that are insurmountable for them alone (for example villages without a kindergarten, school, grocery store, good public transport, etc.).

A best practice example of this is the Fuchsmühle (here briefly in English) , which acts as a network that shows overall solidarity and is non-binding on an individual level. Its

achievements include a formerly empty shop that has been transformed into an open event space, a working group that combats vacancy, many events and initiatives that are geared towards the needs of the local population, and around 50 new residents of the town.

But the reopening of the pizzeria in Gurro by a group of four young people should also be mentioned here: with this (the only) option of eating out in the village, they have greatly increased the quality of life for the residents and at the same time created a meeting place that has been very well received .

Another option, also linked to the group, is to decide firmly on the longer-term perspective in the countryside and not only initiate the necessary changes, but to implement them completely – less, but further:

We got to know the municipalities of " Niederkaufungen " and " gAstwerke " as best practice examples . They created structures to be able to live well in the country, primarily through shared resources - from cars as an example for common goods including money, to time for communication, social services and care - and the establishment of companies for financial reproduction and closing supply gaps . In addition, they give themselves the necessary social support to be able to strengthen the environment from the stability they have created. The region benefits directly from the offers created, such as (alternative) childcare or the shop with organic, regional products, and is connected and networked through the system of solidarity farming between the municipalities in the region through practical activity. This strengthens cohesion and community spirit. The municipalities, with their regular events and educational workshops, are also a factor that should not be underestimated for cooperation and as a meeting place between the generations.

4. Democracy and tolerance are at risk in rural areas and require the active support of civil society

The departure of young people in particular from a region has far-reaching consequences for participation within civil society, the development of social, political and educational institutions and democratic participation. The participation of young people is crucial for maintaining a critical public, for a renewal of forms of protest and for inclusive spaces.

One example is Ludwigstein Castle in the Meißner district, which has been designed as a place for youth and for self-organization and emancipation since the 19th century. Originating from the early democratic youth movement and led by young volunteers, it is a "democracy learning center" that has built up an international youth meeting place with seminars, conferences and overnight accommodation that links the historical heritage with the pressing needs of the present (https://www.burgludwigstein.de).

In the oldest synagogue in the area, in Abterode, the initiative of the "Friends of Jewish Life in the Werra-Meißner District" was founded several years ago. The initiative is dedicated to promoting democracy, tolerance, preserving historical heritage and promoting the culture of remembrance. Through guided tours of the restored building and the local Jewish cemetery, seminars and school visits, they contribute to education, enlightenment and exchange, especially between the generations (https://www.synagoge-abterode.de/).

The "Museo di Gurro" is a regional museum that, through its objects, gives an impression of the historical heritage of the villages of the Valle Cannobina, a region characterized by agriculture, migration and a border location (https://www.museogurro.it/museo/index.html).

Guided tours by the local museum director are available for groups. It could be perceived more as a place of learning, especially since the finds and facilities allow a quick reference to the reality of life in the past of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The "Amici di Gurro" (Friends of Gurro) are a group of solidarity rural networking between current and former residents. They plan regular festivals and gatherings for the entire valley region and maintain the cultural heritage, especially the connection with the Scottish partner association:
https://www.instagram.com/amici_di_gurro. Nevertheless, there is also a lack of younger participants who organize themselves there in the long term.

A good example of cross-spectrum participation is the initiative "Together for Witzenhausen", which was founded two years ago as a solidarity response to social crises under the motto "together. for each other . self-determined". Different people from Witzenhausen come together in a two-month neighborhood council, and a neighborhood kitchen takes place weekly. Among other things, the initiative has so far produced a neighborhood garden, a women & queer café and a series of city tours and festivals. The goal remains long-term, stable organization that enables local empowerment and support in the face of social and political crises. https://gemeinsam-witzenhausen.de/ .

> **5. There is a need for targeted and reflective models of tourism promotion in order to promote rural structures and not endanger them.**

Tourism is now an important economic factor in many rural regions. However, in order to make it useful and sustainable for the regions themselves, there must be concepts for involving local communities and especially young people and their skills and needs. Otherwise, mass tourism, for example, with the result of rising living costs and the damage to neighborhood and community-oriented structures, can cause more harm than good. We see a negative example of this in the Valle Cannobina on Lake Maggiore with its seasonal Mass tourism (which is only maintained with the help of seasonal workers from other regions) and its sprawling holiday home villages and settlements in the mountains , which do not bring continuous life to the villages but make "ghost villages" experienceable at many times of the year.

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