Civic Engagement – a New Self-Understanding of Villages?

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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 aremore 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 engagementwere 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 ANDWEAKNESSES OFRURAL REGIONS

Theagro-structuralanddemographic changestrongly affects many rural regions and the financial constraints of publichandweaken thedevelopment.Althoughrural regionsmay not begenerally regardedas structuralweak ordisadvantaged, many aregreatly disadvantaged in terms ofeconomic strength, infrastructure equipment orgeneralcommonprosperitydimensions. "Structural weakness" is not limited tospecific spatialcategories such asrural regions.However,in structurallyweak rural regionstheproblems accumulate.Many villagesare facingmanifoldproblems, e.g. buildingvacancyanddecay, decreaseof thetownscape and landscapeimage, job andpopulationdeclinesandmoreinfrastructurelosses(Voß et al. 2011).

Expertsforecast a continueddemographicshift towardsa higherdensity inurban areas, which would lead to furtherlocal disadvantagesin rural regions(Siedentop et al. 2011: pp. 17). To ensurethe sustainability ofvillages andrural regionsin the long term, many municipalitiesare alreadyactive.They are eagerto securethe vitality andactivitiesof villageassociations,promotecivic engagementanda sense of responsibilityas well asto bindyoung people to the region andto preventemigration. Therefore, constantly villages exist, which are able to control theimpacts ofcertain actionsand to ward offabuses.Unlikeother neighboringplaces, theyare ableto secure thesustainability 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 fora new interpretation: (Aring 2010)claimsa more"personal responsibility" of the concernedrural regions. In the future,more flexible, more private sectororcivil societyorganizedinfrastructuresare needed. However, havinga working, vibrant civil societyin the villages andan alteredunderstanding of the statetowardscivic, social orvoluntary activityis crucial(Olk and Hartnuß 2011).

2. BACKGROUNDSAND CONTEXTS CIVICENGAGEMENT

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 Hartnuß 2011: 145). According to the German *Enquête-Kommission*[1] "Futureof 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 requestof aquarter of its members, the German Bundestag hasto establish "*Enquête-Kommissionen*" (commissions of inquiry). These commissionsshould prepareextensive, meaningfulsubjects for decisions.

„voluntary, not profit oriented, for common good, public or takes placein
public space, respectively, andis usually exercisedcommonlyorcooperatively.

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 theperformanceexceeds theeconomic counter value, it can be assumedthat the activitiesare not orientedonamaterial gain(Corsten et al. 2008: 12).

Figure 1visualizesthe disparitiesof the spatial distribution ofengaged people in Germany. In a study,named "Engagementatlas 2009",east-westdisparities andin the westernregions a North-South divide are obvious. Thewestern regionshave highengagementratescompared with theeastern regions;thesocieties in the southern states are clearlymore activethanin 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).
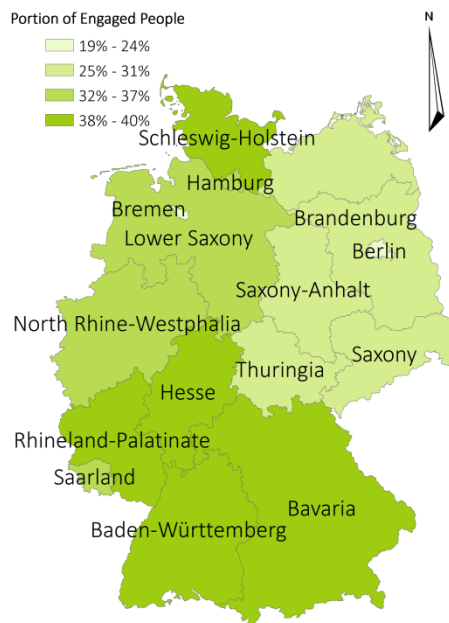

Figure1: Portion of Engaged People in German States(cf. Prognos AG et al. 2009: pp. 18).

2.2 Behavior as Motivator

Why do peoplefollowthe objective of engageement? Whydoesa personseeka particular goal at all? With thesequestions, the so-calledmotivational psychologyis concerned. It examinesgoal-oriented behaviorof people(motivationfor actions) andtriesto explainalignment, endurance and intensity to strive this goal.The purposefulbehavior isalwaysconsidered in acomplex setof goals (Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4; Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2010: 3).

Motivationarises byan interactionof influenceswhich are characterized on one side by thehuman nature(motives, needs, interests, goals) andon the other side the environment

(opportunities, requirements, incentives)(Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4). Motivationencompasses allmotives (Schürmann 2013: 30).(Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 43)definemotivesas "individualpreferences for certainincentiveclasses."Being motivatedmeans, in addition toaffective(emotional) and cognitive(conscious) processes,to pursuea calculated objective, but alsoto engagewithpassion for somethingand to generatesubjective well-being(Brandstätter-Morawietz et al. 2013: pp. 4). Personalandsituationalinfluences determine this motivationandthecorrespondingtargeted-orientedaction(behavior).

In addition to thefactor human nature ("person itself"), the valence(incentive valueor valuation) of the factor"environment"is crucial and acting ona person. The questionis which incentive is assessed as important for the person. The incentivevalue must beevaluated individually, becauseithas possiblydifferent effectson differentpeopleandcan changeover time (Rothermund and Eder 2011: pp. 43).

Motivesexplain why peoplewith specific goalsrespond to specificincentivesin a situation, while others do not (Schürmann 2013: pp. 29). In a surveyof volunteers,threetypes of motivationofvolunteerswere identified:(1) People, who are **oriented to public welfare**, mainlywant todo something forthe common good andhelp others.They aremainlyacitve in the regions ofsocial affairs and health, school and kindergarten as well aschurchand religion.(2) The**companionshiporiented people** aresuperficially interested inthe fun of theactivityand to familiarize themselves withsympathetic people.(3) The **interest-oriented people**represent theirown interests,take ontheir ownresponsibility, andwant to expand theirknowledge/experienceandgain recognition. For thistypeespeciallymany young peoplehave an affinity. Theinterest-oriented ones are a bitmoreconnected to thecommon goodthan thecompanionship-oriented ones(Gensicke and Geiss 2010: 122).

Peopleusually choosetasks orengagement activities, which suite best totheir motivesand thusbest to theirneeds. So activitiesmust be offered, which meetthe personal needsofengaged people to gainpositive effects ontheirwillingness to participate(Schürmann 2013: 41).The motivation to engage themselves can be summarized in five sections:

- Altruisticmotives| Duty andpublic welfare
- Community-based motives | Communication and socialintegration
- Formation-basedmotives | Activeparticipation
- Problem-oriented motives | Coping withtheir ownproblems andchanges
- Socialgrievances
- 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 partof the research projectsurveysof various kindswere 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 partof a workshop with the focus onengagement in village development,a brainstorming was performed onengagement,itsopportunities andbarriers. The participants were administrators and (village) politicians, came from regional management or land development management or were citizengroups/initiativesmainlyfrom Lower Saxony.Themotivation forengagement,limits and frameworkwere collectedwithin group work. Afterwards, the different groupssystematizedandordered the ideas withina second pass.

Projects are followed which are "at heart" andimportant forsubjectmotivated engagement (interest motivation). Many wantto be activeingroups (engagementneedssupporters or a common goal), want tosocialize andto engagein the homeandfor the family (binding motives). It is beneficial forfuture engagementwhen projectsor activitieswere successfulin the past.Also quick andvisible resultsand available(financial) meanshave a positive effect. Accordingly,a lack of resourcesand high timerequirements, excessive demandsof partiesas well astohigh goals, financial barriersanda lack of successinhibitoryhave negative effectsoncivic 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 addressingto 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 do not arise.

Mentalityaffects thecharacteristicsofengagement. Depending on the region, peopleare more willingto engageandless inclinedto do so.The study "EngagementAtlas2009" identifies this aspect as wellastrongeast-westgradientandaclear north-south divisionin the westernregions (Prognos AG et al. 2009: pp. 18).

For the future developmentof engagement, it is important that the (initial)actions and activitiesof engagement are not restricted to special structures (groups, associations etc.).Even if themunicipality mayhave good ideas, engaged peopledonot want to be boundimmediately or be attached to other-directed groups orstructures.Only in the case of activities, which need determined structures (e.g.forapplications, acquisition of funds, etc.), associations or similarstructures have tobe founded.Any engagementrequires clearobjectives andareasonabletime frame.For many projects,it is importantthat engagement arisesas a combination ofpermanent "standing"and short-termactivationof potentials.

Engagement"wants to be seen". Engaged peopleexpectfortheir engagement a correspondingappreciationof their activities(including therecognitionthe investedexpenditure). Engaged people expect an appropriateacknowledgment fromthe "right"level: it may bedesirable, for example, by the pressorpoliticians,from the family, associations or specialgroups, but alsoby the public.This isvariable anddepends on therespectivemotivation.

The presence of a key stakeholderis advantageous for project-related engagement. This "care taking person" or "alpha wolf" can be characterized asa 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.). Thiskey stakeholderseems intrinsically motivated, while "followers" are more extrinsically motivated and adapt their activitiesto the specifications.

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While this key stakeholder is perceived as positive, a dominant person can have a negative effect. Existingrigidassociationstructurescan slowor limitengagement as well.Other hindering factors result from human weaknesses such as pessimism and intolerance, criticism assignments or killer phrase 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 villagesin 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 engagementthe respondents have. A special focus wason engagement for village development and conversions. Foradditional details, we refer to Weitkamp (2014).

The majorityof respondents areengagedcivically. To an average ofhalf of the respondents, these activitiestake place attheir place of residence.Regionalandinter-regionalengagementisratherlessapplied. Thelocallygrown uprespondentsare mostlyengaged.Arelationship (positive correlation) could be observed between the length of residencein the region andthe length ofengagement.Nevertheless,we must point out that new residents arealsovery involved in some places like in Ovelgönneand Leiferde.One-third of the respondentsare notengaged.

Engagementestablishesitselfgenerallythroughspending timeand labor. Large time spanswere named considering the question how longthe personis involved. Longactivitiesdominate;periods indicate an average of10 tomore than 30 years. 80% of the engaged peopleare regularly engaged. They spend 3 hours a week in the mean or4.7 hoursa weekin themedian,respectively.Overall,75% of the engaged peopleare activemorethan 2hours per week. Manyrespondentssee themselves as providers of knowledge andideas. Engagementis livedtohavefun. Manyrespondentswant to bepart of a groupor tohelp othersorto improvetheir own communities. Theywant to bebonded orconnected in groups or the community. Nevertheless, the need for self-realizationplays a majorrole.

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 willingnessto engage actively inredevelopmentprojectsis rather low,althoughabout halfof the respondentsknow examples ofbuildingsthat are reusedafter a longvacancy in the village. While some willingness for redeveloping abuildingfor common use exist, there is only an

extremely slight interest for privateredevelopmentprojects.This would be potentiallyfeasible fornot even50%. In Eisdorf, with the highest level of suffering, thewillingness to engage within a conversation project is the lowest.

The majority would support the redevelopment by labor or by ideas. But in allvillages, the largestobstacle for engagement is stated as a lack oftimespecifiedby the profession. The Enquete-Kommission (2002b: 281)hasalsodiscovered thisas main obstacleoffixedengagement. Theweekly working timecontains an average of37.5 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 willingto engagein theirvillage (24%) ormaybewould be willing to engagelocally(50%). InLeiferde, there is a highrateof potentiallydisposition(almost 90% say *yes*or*maybe*). In Eisdorf, thereare onlyjust under 65% ofthe potentialwillingly. Bundeexposesthe greatest clear potentialof engagement: 30% answeredthe question with*yes*.

3.3 Case studies

Finally,good practiceswere examined. Thestudyfocuse on conversion projects in Lower Saxony, which were realized with the helpcivic engagement. With personal and telephone interviews, the stakeholders of the processes wereinterviewedon motivations, aims and reasons. In addition, the effect on village development and obstacles werequestioned. 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. Thestakeholderswere convinced oftheir activitiesand 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 loansbecause of the relatedrisk, 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 isimportant. 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 areineffective.

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 willingnessfor engagementdecreases. 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 ofthe village, the resulting identification and the sense of community. People cando 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 arehigh, 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

Engagementarises frompersonalmotives andsituationalcircumstances.Community-orientatedpeople want to beactivein agroup, have fun, and realize themselves. Hence, thecall forengagementoften occursfrom their ownenvironmentsuch as family,friendsor associations. Engagementisexemplified. This is alsoevidentin thedetermination thatengagementusuallyarisesat a young age. Itis generallyinsertedin terms of timeand labor. Many non-engaged people mentioned thelack of time asan obstacle.

Municipalities whowant 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 fora conversion can only be received if itwillbe 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 correspondedkey stakeholders.

Because an activation potential of non-engaged persons is apparent, it is important to share projects and works. Many non-engaged persons cannot afforda constantsupport due tolack of time.Here,shortmanageableactivitiesshould be offered:engagement forvillage

developmentshould be composedby regularsupport andmanageableactions. In particular,for theepisodic-activated are key stakeholders and organizer of special importance. However, it isto questionwhether 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 municipalitieswith higherdistress, a trend toward greater engagementis evident.Oftenpurposeincentivesstand in the foreground. The personsinvolvedinavoidancemotives, the identifiedproblemshouldbe eliminated or reduced. Herehowever, it isimportant to demonstratesuccessyet. Although this isdifficult in adeficientenvironment, it is crucial to indicate success,to identify progressandto appreciatethe engagement. On the one hand, the municipalityitself andon the other hand, the environmentof the engaged personsare encouraged. If this fails, the engagementforvillage developmentisomitted.

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.

Futurework should focuson theactivation ofpotentiallyengagedcitizensand businesses.In particular,there is a needfor investigation,whichaddressingthe particular groupexpects for their participation and what contributioncanbe realistically expected. Especiallythe latteraspectrequires specialattention, citizensandbusinesses should notfeel overwhelmedwith their use. Therefore, it isnecessary to establishmilestonesand intermediate objectives for individual projects, so that a verifiablesuccessisquicklyvisible.The keymotivationfor continuedengagement istheappreciation andthe visiblesuccesses of the(last) insert.

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