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Promoting living and innovation spaces and the need to overcome the simplistic urban-rural divide

In territorial development we essentially differentiate between regions, cities, towns and villages. Urban planning models, such as in Germany, are also often organised in this way: “regional centres”, “middle centres” and “small centres” in many countries are spatial planning units to define the roles and responsibilities of cities and towns. The higher the centre category, the more inhabitants the place usually has, and the more the supply of services is usually required. In this respect, small centres such as villages and smaller towns are responsible for the supply of basic services. Regional centres have to offer more sophisticated services such as higher education, specialised hospital services, etc. Nowadays, these planning categories are



being questioned. They follow a traditional model of development which assumes that innovation orientation is relevant rather for larger places. What is now getting increasing attention in many OECD countries is the perspective of defining territories as living and innovation spaces which overcome superficial urban-rural dichotomies. The reason for this is that neighbouring locations are no longer able

to pursue isolated approaches. At the same time, such silo approaches have shown a lack of development impact. Public budget constraints, demographic changes, including the aging of the society, brain drain in rural areas, overall population decrease and the need for territories to combine environmental, economic and social solutions more strongly make the creation of synergies necessary.



In the EU and particularly in Germany, governments have started to encourage a search for innovative territorial processes that overcome traditional spatial boundaries and encourage the identification of win-win solutions. Support programmes and contests have been organised to encourage territories to define their own vision for future development and to become certified as “smart” or “future” regions, cities or villages. This trend puts territories and their stakeholders, such as economic development agencies, urban planners and social institutions, under pressure to rethink daily routines, to reflect on new combinations of hierarchical, bottom-up and participatory approaches, creative ways of planning and territorial (network) governance models. At the same time, it opens new room for innovation potentials and constellations.

We would like to demonstrate this trend with an example of a typical middle-sized German city with about 75 000 inhabitants. The city is called Rheine and it has administratively integrated villages. It is striving to become a modern “future city” that can be considered a stereotype of a middle-sized town in a relatively dynamic rural region. Nonetheless, the city has been forced to redefine its development path due to urban as well as rural structural change challenges that require new ways of doing things. Former car-assembling companies have closed their factory gates and the city has lost its military base advantages. Innovation and the promotion of new businesses are a challenge, as is the promotion of an environmentally friendly and attractive location. The adjacent villages are facing the consequences

of demographic change. Young villagers are leaving due to a lack of employment opportunities, mobility and innovation dynamics. To slow down or to turn this change around, the villages are expected to define new economic and social roles that go beyond agriculture, nature and community life. They rather need to embrace mobility and find new opportunities in the areas of shopping, employment, innovative business solutions and social entrepreneurship. Rheine has started to increase its regional inter-municipal cooperation with other medium-sized cities that face similar structural change problems. The success in creating new innovation space will depend on the city's ability to follow a dynamic dual-innovation strategy by staying competitive on the one hand, and creating a highly attractive living space on the other hand. This double strategy involves a) promoting new relations and innovative solutions with other surrounding medium-sized cities, and b) stronger integration of rural villages and rural innovation approaches as an integral part of the city approach. Figure 1 visualises this approach.

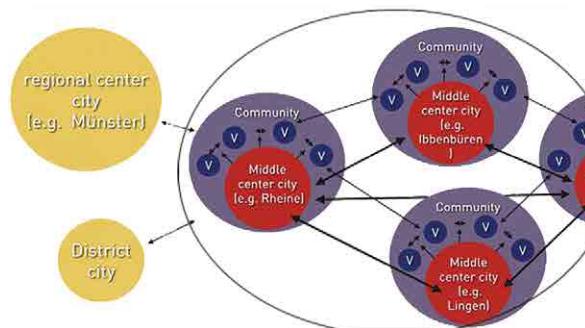
Such a double strategy could also be relevant for territorial development in developing countries:

- To make use of various competitive advantages, an integrative approach is necessary in which closely linked rural and city areas are considered one living space with their diversity and synergies emphasised.
- Medium-sized towns as well as rural areas often lack innovation orientation. Enlarging the territorial focus will also provide a larger critical mass of motivated and engaged stakeholders and local experts who search for new solutions.

- The definition of a territory as a living space requires the decentralisation of power and stronger bottom-up and participatory approaches for decision making. Villages and cities have to learn to become more innovative and open to learning from each other.

LED approaches are therefore advised to stop falling into the trap of strictly dividing areas into urban and rural, but rather to interpret territories as living and learning spaces in which innovation is initiated through the promotion of new actor networks, different perspectives and the proactive search for creative solutions.

Figure 1: Double strategy that promotes city and village linkages to create an innovative living space (example from a German region)



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