IRS AKTUELL
Newsletter for Research on Society and Space

Social and Digital Innovations for Rural Life
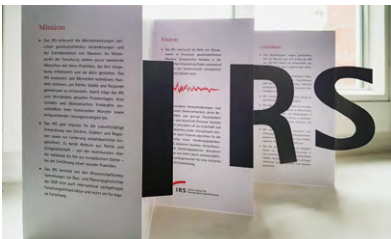
Content

Dear Readers of IRS aktuell,

During the COVID 19 pandemic, it seems, the great escape to the countryside began. The media are full of stories about former city dwellers discovering rural life for themselves, escaping cramped living conditions and overcrowded subways to find happiness in village self-sufficiency, their own garden and perceived safety from infection. Never have we had to answer more press enquiries on the subject of urban flight than in the last year and a half. The sudden attention reflects a real trend, which, however, was already clearly apparent before Corona and which is more multi-faceted than often portrayed.

Yes, the time when rural areas were written off wholesale is over. However, this image change has been underway for some time. Small rural towns are becoming increasingly attractive. Newcomers and old residents are revitalising villages, sometimes even in structurally weak regions far from the urban centres. Another megatrend is digitalisation. Online shopping and mobile working - now fuelled by the pandemic - have been threatening the "business model" of expensive city centres for some time. At the same time, where connectivity is sufficient, digitalisation supports new working arrangements in rural areas and new forms of social organisation in villages. In the penultimate issue of IRS aktuell (No. 94, "Digital Tools and Visual Media"), we reported on the "Smart Villagers" - the well networked and committed villagers who find socially innovative solutions to the problems of rural areas with digital means, from the village car to the digitally bookable community house. This issue is now dedicated to the question of how innovative, digitally supported solutions for rural areas can be promoted and implemented.

Another piece of news on our own behalf: For the first time, the IRS has given itself a mission statement that brings together our mission, our vision for the future and central guidelines for our practical actions. Its essence: We are interested in the people who organise social and spatial change, and how they do it practically. We explore the opportunities and possibilities that lie in the crises and upheavals of our time. And we are committed to a dedicated transfer of knowledge - for sustainable villages, cities and regions and for the reduction of socio-spatial inequalities (see). Together with an amendment of our statutes, an internationalisation of our Scientific Advisory Board and an ongoing development process of our organisational structure, the new mission statement stands for a strategic repositioning of the IRS, which will be completed with our upcoming research programme from 2022. Stay tuned!

Now I wish you a stimulating read.

Yours Oliver Ibert

Rural innovations: Doing Research with Practitioners

Research leads to findings that are communicated to practitioners through knowledge transfer. However, research often also takes place directly with practitioners, together with initiatives or local organisations and with a focus on concrete problems. Knowledge transfer takes place in both directions: From practice to research and vice versa. In several projects, the IRS conducts practice-oriented research on socially innovative problem solutions in rural areas.

Innovative Training Network RurAction

In the recently concluded Innovative Training Network "RurAction", researchers from seven European countries investigated the conditions under which social enterprises can contribute to the development of social innovations and thus to the development of rural regions. The ten Early Stage Researchers (ESR) of the network worked individually on their doctoral projects. In addition, they each spent time in social enterprises in rural Europe: for example, in a local development agency in Portugal or a cooperative for stevia cultivation and marketing in Greece. In this way, they learned about the challenges on the ground and complemented their research work with a practical qualification. Conversely, the companies participated directly in the emergence of new scientific knowledge. Jamie Baxter and Sune Stoustrup were based at the IRS as ESRs.

Based on empirical analyses, RurAction was thus able to close a research gap at the interface between social innovation research, social entrepreneurship and rural development. At the same time, recommendations for action for the municipal, regional and subnational (Länder), national and transnational (EU) levels were derived on the basis of the results. The most important finding, which was noted in the RurAction Policy Paper "How to promote social innovations in struc-

Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann
Tel +49 3362 793 270
gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de

Gabriela Christmann is a professor of the sociology of space, knowledge and communication at Technische Universität Berlin and heads the research department "Communication and Knowledge Dynamics in Space" at the IRS. Her current research focuses on digitally supported social innovations in rural areas and the mediatisation of planning processes.

turally weak rural areas" (IRS Dialog 5/2020), among others, is that social innovations in rural areas take place in typical phases. In these phases, they are confronted with specific challenges and can be supported by policy in a correspondingly phase-sensitive manner (see p. 6 and p. 15).

While the aforementioned policy paper is aimed at political decision-makers, the "Handbook for Practitioners" (IRS Dialog 6/2020) targets social enterprises, helping them to reflect on their role and strategies in rural regions. In addition, a 30-minute documentary film produced by Łukasz Rogowski and Michał Sita as well as a digital exhibition pursue the goal of making the potentials of social enterprises in rural areas even more visible. Over the course of five regional policy roundtables and one policy roundtable at the EU level, there were also intensive discussions about possible funding strategies – including with representatives of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and Directorate-General for Regional Policy and Urban Development (DG REGIO), who received the project results with great interest.

RurAction (2016-2021) was funded as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action from the EU's Horizon 2020 research programme and coordinated by Gabriela Christmann. It involved nine research institutions and six social enterprises.
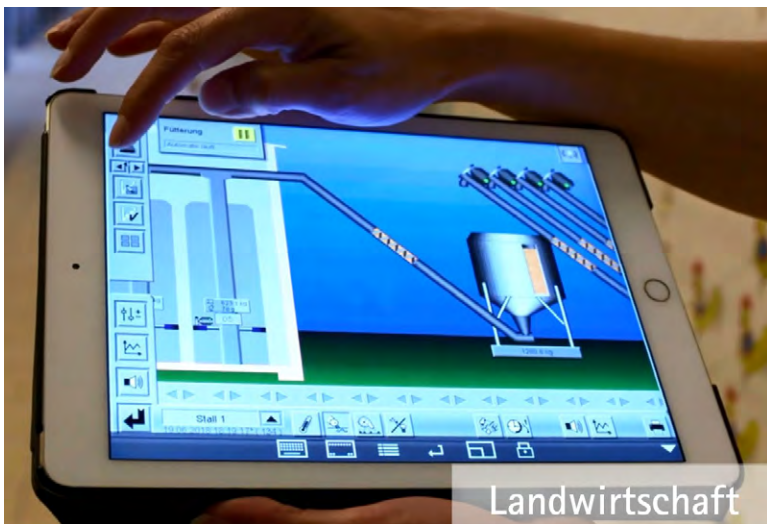
Landwirtschaft

ÖPNV/Daseinsvorsorge

Naturnaher Tourismus

## Study and Dialogue Process on Social Enterprises

In a much smaller project, the need for advice from state politicians provided the impetus for research and for a dialogue process that is now ongoing. In 2020, the IRS was commissioned by the State of Brandenburg's Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Energy (MWAE) to compile an overview - including a mapping - of the status, development prospects and funding needs of social enterprises in the state. The focus of the study "Marktorientierte Sozialunternehmen in Brandenburg" (Market-Oriented Social Enterprises in Brandenburg) was on enterprises that generate income by positioning novel products, services and business models and thus pursue a social or ecological agenda. One result of the study was that the perception of social enterprises as important actors in shaping rural areas could still be improved. The authors therefore recommended, among other things, a dialogue process between actors in politics and administration and social enterprises. The MWAE is now following this recommendation by organising three in-depth discussions with social enterprises and representatives of the state of Brandenburg starting in May 2021 together with Social Impact gGmbH, which was also involved in the preparation of the study. Ralph Richter and Ariane Sept will take part in these discussions as experts. At the end of the dialogue process, a roadmap with measures for improving the situation of social enterprises in Brandenburg, taking into account the recommendations for action made in the study, should be available.

Innovation Alliance region 4.0

Other projects focus on supporting the organisation of innovations and at the same time scientifically substantiating and classifying them so that experiences from individual projects can be generalised and transferred. The

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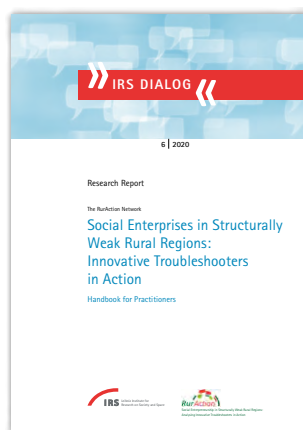
▶ Link to the Policy Paper

▶ Podcast Episode 7: Sozialunternehmen – was sie können, was sie brauchen

▶ Working with Communities. Social Enterprises in Rural Regions of Europe
Youtube-Video

IRS takes on this role in the "Innovationsbündnis" (innovation alliance) "region 4.0", for example. The alliance supports problem-centred innovations in the Barnim and Uckermark regions in north-eastern Brandenburg and in the Uecker-Randow district in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (in its old borders). It addresses the fields of action agriculture and nutrition, services of general interest and infrastructures as well as nature-based tourism. Civil society participation formats in the region play an important role in the innovation alliance: a "Machbarschaftstag" (feasibility day) focused on the establishment of coworking in rural areas. A "Future Day" with young people focused on ways to secure skilled labour. And a German-Polish "RegioHack" looked for solutions to various challenges in the German-Polish border region between Eberswalde and Szczecin - for example in the areas of housing, work and entrepreneurship. These formats were developed from the region in a problem-centred way and implemented by incorporating knowledge from outside, for example from universities. Following the feasibility day, a coworking space was actually founded in Pasewalk.

Other results were further developed in workshops. Local leaders (e.g. mayors) contributed their experiences to the analysis of the innovation environment in a virtual focus group discussion on opportunities, experiences and barriers of regional innovation and development processes. In this way, first approaches to solutions were developed and possibilities for connecting the results were pointed out. The virtual format of the focus group reduced participation barriers and facilitated participation. Peter Ulrich is working on region 4.0 at the IRS.

The project is funded by the WIR! programme of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and coordinated by the Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development.

Open Region Project

The project "Open Region: Regional Challenges as Starting Points for Innovation" investigates and develops new formats of knowledge transfer from universities and supports problem-centred innovations in South Brandenburg. It helps to identify opportunities for innovative solutions in the region and to focus on their users. In this way, it follows the strategic concept of the "Open Region" developed in the IRS, which is being systematically put into practice for the first time in this project. In order to identify previously ignored opportunities for innovation, the expertise of citizens is brought together with scientific expertise. "Innovation Salons" are an event format with which the project team, consisting of Suntje Schmidt and Julia Stadermann, pursues this goal. Innovation Salons do not generate final solutions. Instead, they open up new perspectives on problems and bring together people who were not aware that they shared a common problem perception and solution competence. In its current form, the format has two stages: In the first salon, the participants jointly define and concretise the respective challenge or problem situation. In a subsequent salon with predominantly the same group of participants, external technical and process expertise is then included in order to develop model solutions together. In this way, not only are innovative approaches to solutions supported, but at the same time the transfer of knowledge between regional actors and university staff is expanded.

The first Salon Tandem took place in the first half of 2021. It addressed solutions for medical care in rural areas using the example of the municipal health house in the small town of Baruth/Mark. In addition, comparable initiatives and institutions as well as researchers and transfer staff from regional universities were represented. During the first salon session, they prepared a challenge analysis and identified potentials for overcoming them. In the second salon session, they worked on three selected potentials in more detail and developed project outlines on their basis: to supplement the health house with mobility concepts; to integrate digital solutions into the health house concept; and to locate the health house in new funding contexts beyond the health sector, for example sustainability. In addition, new networks were created between the participating institutions. Two more Innovation Salon tandems are being planned.

The project is part of the "Innohub13" network of the Technical University of Applied Sciences in Wildau and Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg. It is funded by the BMBF programme "Innovative Hochschule" (innovative university).

Dr. Peter Ulrich
Tel +49 3362 793 200
peter.ulrich@leibniz-irs.de

Peter Ulrich is a political scientist and research associate in the research department "Institutional Change and Regional Public Goods". He conducts research on innovation strategies for rural areas within the framework of application-oriented projects. His second focus is research on the development of border areas.

Julia Stadermann
Tel +49 3362 793 227
julia.stadermann@leibniz-irs.de

Julia Stadermann is an economic psychologist and research associate in the research department "Dynamics of Economic Spaces". As part of the project "Open Region: Regional Challenges as Starting Points for Innovation", she is researching problem-driven innovations and new formats of dialogue-based knowledge transfer.

How Digital is Rural Volunteering?

Not only since the COVID 19 pandemic, but even more so as a result of it, digitisation is considered a central development factor for rural areas. Rural civil society and its voluntary commitment are increasingly coming into focus of research on digitalisation: The voluntary sector's effectiveness is potentially greatly expandes by digital tools. However, there is hardly any data on the extent to which voluntary engagement in rural areas is already digitised. A new project of the IRS in cooperation with neuland21 is filling this gap.

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Since 2015, the department "Dynamics of Communication, Knowledge and Spatial Development" has been researching how social innovations are driven in rural areas, what problems they solve and how they can be supported politically. The lead project "Smart Villagers" has analysed how digitalisation steps and social innovations interact (see also IRS aktuell 94, p. 15: "Digital solutions for peripheral villages"). Across all the cases considered, it is evident that social innovations and digitisation projects in rural regions often happen bottom-up. They frequently unfold in the area of voluntary work or are driven forward by volunteers. Often, these digitally supported social-innovative initiatives are politically desired and supported by public funds.

In recent years, there has been an increase in campaigns to support the digitalisation of volunteering. In the course of the COVID 19 pandemic, the

Dr. Ariane Sept
Tel +49 3362 793 146
ariane.sept@leibniz-irs.de

Ariane Sept is a sociologist and deputy head of the research department "Communication and Knowledge Dynamics in Space" at the IRS. Her research focuses on current developments in rural and urban spaces, social innovations, socio-spatial acceleration and deceleration, and European urban and regional policies.

neuland21

need for digital tools and the associated knowledge became particularly clear. At the same time, however, campaigning and funding practice for the digitisation of engagement in rural areas seems to be running ahead of an inventory of the same: systematic findings on the use of digital tools and practices in volunteering in Germany are hardly available so far. Both in practice and in academia, a differentiated and evidence-based view of rural areas, particularly with regard to the topic of digitisation of rural volunteering, is still lacking. Research on this is still in its infancy.

The research department therefore began work on the new research project "Between Appstore and Register of Associations - Rural Volunteerism on the Way to the Digital Age", or "App-VeL" for short, in May 2021 under the leadership of Ariane Sept and together with the think and do tank neuland21. The project aims to create an up-to-date picture of the use and handling of digital technologies in voluntary work in Germany with a focus on rural areas - differentiated according to types of area, organisation profiles and age structure of those involved. Based on this, the project team will make a well-founded assessment of the opportunities and risks of using technology in rural voluntary work. Although the advantages of digitalisation for voluntary work, especially in rural areas, are repeatedly emphasised in politics and civil society - not least against the background of

intensified digitalisation debates in the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic - there is hardly any systematic knowledge about the actual spread of digital technologies in rural voluntary work. These include digital communication and project management tools, social media and apps.

With the help of an online survey of voluntary organisations as well as expert and in-depth interviews, the project investigates (1) to what extent and in what way digitalisation has found its way into voluntary work, (2) whether and to what extent spatial, organisational or other differences in the dissemination and use of digital technologies can be identified, (3) what opportunities and risks digital technologies offer for the further development of rural volunteering, (4) what support needs exist in the context of the digitalisation of volunteering, and (5) what role civil society-based engagement plays for digitalisation in rural areas. Against the background of the findings that rural development is particularly often driven by volunteers, answering these questions is also important for innovative and public welfare-oriented rural development with a view to strengthening equal living conditions.

Initial studies suggest that the level of digitisation and also the experience in using digital applications varies greatly depending on the type of space, organisational profile and age structure. Barriers in the use of digital technologies due to insufficient technical knowledge are also still reported. The current restrictions on face-to-face meetings and gatherings have recently given the whole issue a new momentum, highlighting both advantages and disadvantages of numerous digital applications that have seen increased use during the crisis. Village associations or municipal councils have meanwhile often had positive experiences with digital meetings, but the supply of technical devices for all participants often takes place via personal networks or infor-

Read more

BMFSFJ. (2020). Third Engagement Report. Zukunft Zivilgesellschaft: Junges Engagement im digitalen Zeitalter.
▸ bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/service/ publikationen/dritter-engagement- bericht-156434

DSEE. (2021). We - German Foundation for Engagement and Volunteering.
▸ deutsche-stiftung-engagement- und- ehrenamt.de/wir

▸ IRS aktuell No 18: Digital Tools and Visual Media

mal lending structures. It also became apparent, for example, that the often existing need for support and training requires personal contact.

In the practice of voluntary engagement, the topic of digitalisation gained importance even before the COVID 19 pandemic. The third "Engagementbericht" (engagement report) of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), which was commissioned in 2018 and presented in 2020, focused on "young engagement in the digital age" from the very beginning. The report (p. 24) states that in general "two different approaches and ways of dealing with digitalisation in the engagement sector can be identified: One part of the organisations perceives digitalisation as a challenge that is difficult to grasp, another part is already actively implementing the potentials of a public good-oriented digitalisation". The report describes five types of engagement organisations with regard to digitisation: the "actively forward-thinking", the "energetically mediating", the "resourcefully shaping", the "pragmatically using" and the "cautiously sceptical". The cautiously sceptical are mainly associations, which "usually work on a regional level" (p. 23 of the report). It can be assumed that a significant number of these are associations in rural areas.

Current initiatives by civil society actors are also increasingly addressing the potential of digitalisation for voluntary engagement. Examples include the "Forum Digitalisierung und Engagement" (Forum Digitalisation and Engagement) launched by the Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (Federal Network for Civic Engagement) in November 2019, the Caritas campaign 2019 "Sozial braucht digital" (Social needs Digital) and the funding campaign "digital. engagiert" (digitally engaged) of the Stifterverband. The first funding programmes of the Deutsche Stiftung für

Ehrenamt und Engagement (German Foundation for Volunteering and Involvement), which was founded in March 2020, also indicate that the foundation sees the promotion of online services and digital infrastructures as essential for the work of voluntary institutions in general and in rural areas in particular and wants to strengthen them accordingly. The foundation also plans to develop educational offers for volunteers on digitalisation in voluntary work, although it is still unclear which specific needs are to be met.

In the AppVeL research project, the IRS cooperates closely with neuland21. In doing so, the different competences and networks of the two partner organisations are bundled in a targeted way: While the project participants at the IRS communicate primarily to the scientific academic community, neuland21 addresses the practice community in particular and will also produce practice-oriented educational materials from the project. AppVel is fun-

Berit Barutzki,
Projektleiterin
Zivilgesellschaft & Ehrenamt
bei neuland21,
berit.barutzki@neuland21.de

Berit Barutzki supports the programme area Civil Society and Volunteering as a project manager at neuland21. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Magdeburg and researches diversity and digital transformation processes in civil society. After completing her Master's degree at Vrije University Amsterdam, she worked as a team leader of a volunteering platform.

ded by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) from the Federal Programme for Rural Development (BULE). It is a community of eleven BULE-funded research projects that conduct research throughout Germany on the topic of "Voluntary Engagement in Rural Areas".

Policy for Rural Areas:
Take Initiatives Seriously and Support Innovations!

Committed, creative, innovative – social enterprises and initiatives are helping to promote rural areas. The research of the IRS shows that even regions that are considered peripheral and "disconnected" have potential for new ideas and solutions and use it. However, in order to have a wider impact, the commitment needs better framework conditions. For politics and funding practice, this means: providing infrastructures, creating recognition and helping innovations to break through.

The problems of rural areas, especially in structurally weak and remote regions, are well known: Emigration and vacancy, loss of cultural offerings, services and infrastructures, too few job, educational and living prospects. But not only since the COVID 19 pandemic has there been an opposite trend in the rural "hinterland" of large metropolises, namely growing migration from the city to the countryside, which brings new challenges with it: Is there enough bandwidth, rail kilometres and daycare places for the new rural dwellers? Will new commuter traffic be induced? Will working from home be feasible in the long run, or will office workplaces have to follow suit?

In our research, we asked how new solutions for typical problems of rural areas emerge. In doing so, we focused on two phenomena: the emergence processes of social innovations that produce novel solutions to the problems mentioned at the beginning, and social enterprises that combine a social or ecological mission with a private-sector business model. Both are highly relevant for the sustainability of rural areas. What we have learned about them should, in our view, be an important point of orientation for rural development funding policy.

Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann
Tel +49 3362 793 270
gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de

Gabriela Christmann is a professor of the sociology of space, knowledge and communication at Technische Universität Berlin and heads the research department "Communication and Knowledge Dynamics in Space" at the IRS. Her current research focuses on digitally supported social innovations in rural areas and the mediatisation of planning processes.

Prioritise Digitisation

New ideas are driven by problems and opportunities. The line between the two is not sharp and is often a matter of perception: an empty inn is a problem from the point of view of the village community, but from the point of view of an architect moving in, it may be a potential. A lack of mobile phone and broadband coverage creates the impetus to revive the old village shop as a wireless hotspot. Thinning medical care is the impetus for new telemedicine concepts, rural coworking is (perhaps, see) the answer to a lack of digital workplaces, and the village car that can be booked via smartphone responds to mobility bottlenecks. This provokes the question of whether the innovativeness of rural society can possibly overcome supply deficits itself - and thus release the state from its obligation to create equal living conditions.

The answer is clearly "no". Because the innovations in question are by no means created everywhere and only under rare conditions - more on this later. The state plays a contradictory role here, sometimes as an impediment, sometimes as an enabler. In any case, the public sector is responsible for essential framework conditions - infrastructures, regulations, administrative capacities, qualification offers – for the emergence and, above

all, the successful spread of innovations. We advocate that infrastructure policy for rural areas should embrace the idea of innovation and actively take up the creative ideas that rural residents develop.

Digitalisation must take a central position in this. Digital tools, digital connectivity and digital skills are the crucial resource for the development and implementation of new concepts. While self-help may be an innovation driver in individual cases where broadband is lacking, the role of digitalisation as an enabler, for medicine, mutual aid, local supply, mobility, education, entrepreneurship and work, far outweighs this. Almost all villages have also recently experienced a loss of communication in and about the village, a loss of the most important "glue" of a community. We have observed that digitally mediated communication can lead to improved face-to-face communication and thus revitalise villages, making them more attractive to newcomers. Any strategy for rural areas must therefore also consider the digital capacity of all people in these areas at every step. Broadband at every milk can? Yes, please.

State or Society? State and Society!

When we ask the question, who specifically drives new solutions, it becomes apparent once again that the dichotomy "state versus society" does not hold. Socially innovative initiatives are driven by a wide range of committed people: Newcomers and old residents, experts and laypersons, mayors and municipal representatives. It is striking that it is not civil society alone that is the driving force behind the initiative, but that government agencies at different levels are also involved. It is often the administration at district and municipal level that makes the difference. If they are competent and committed – which they are in many places, though by no means always and everywhere – they multiply the power of the citizens. This central role illustra-

Dr. Ralph Richter
Tel +49 3362 793 215
ralph.richter@leibniz-irs.de

Ralph Richter is a research associate in the research department""Communication and Knowledge Dynamics in Space". His research and interests focus on rural development, social innovation, social entrepreneurship and village and urban neighbourhood development.

tes how essential it is to digitally equip the administration. Ministries at the state and federal level, in turn, make important contributions to supra-local networking and the dissemination of new concepts.

One type of organisation in particular stands for acting at permeable system boundaries, namely the social enterprise. Whether in care, education, inclusion, tourism, agriculture, trade, culture or regional development, social enterprises creatively develop new business models and thus pursue a social or ecological mission. In this way, they generate social innovations themselves or participate in their creation. Social enterprises are profit-oriented to a certain extent, but do not transfer their profits to external investors. They regularly subsidise a social agenda, for example in education, with a business operation, such as a retail offer. In a study for the federal state of Brandenburg's Ministry of Economics, we were able to show that social enterprises have an above-average presence in rural areas and address rural problems to a large extent, for example in agriculture and environmental protection.

Social enterprises fill gaps left by the state, but they do not replace it. They act differently from public institutions. Their local ties in conjunction with networks beyond the region, enable them to recognise local opportunities and recombine them with "imported" ideas into innovative approaches. In doing so, social enterprises cooperate with the public sector and are also dependent on its concession.

In this open space of interaction, visibility and recognition are a shared good that must be cultivated. Citizens and local politicians in rural communities, but also local administrations, must be taken seriously as shapers of rural areas and be given the appropriate resources and leeway, especially by higher administrative levels. Conversely, social enterprises need more recognition in administrations

and ministries, where the image of enterprises is still shaped by the classic private-sector investor. The social enterprise scene itself is often too little networked and not always aware of its role. It needs to become more visible - internally and externally. Measures at different levels, from an award for the social enterprise of the year to a reform of the restrictive tax law for non-profit organisations, would help.

Innovation-Friendly Funding Landscape

Social innovations cannot be forced. Their emergence depends on numerous favourable factors coming together. In an ideal-typical situation, it could unfold like this: In local conversations, people recognise a problem as an opportunity. A view from the outside can help with this reinterpretation, which is why people who have moved or returned are often the creative initiators. They generate an idea from their own experience and the opportunity they have identified. The idea is shared in a small circle, receives support and is decisively pushed forward by one or more key figures - a generic term for particularly committed, strong leaders and networked individuals. Thanks to good networking and previous experience, funding can be obtained, a pilot project started, perhaps a social enterprise founded. External expertise is added: Experts from outside bring in technical, administrative and strategic competences, professionalise the project. People use the new offer, first at the location, then beyond. The project can be expanded, gains a broad user base and eventually becomes a reference project for other regions.

We have systematised this - idealised - sequence of a successful innovation into phases. Each of these phases brings its own challenges, and an innovation can fail due to any of these challenges. We have therefore named measures that can be applied in a phase-sensitive manner at different political-administrative levels

Dr. Ariane Sept
Tel +49 3362 793 146
ariane.sept@leibniz-irs.de

Ariane Sept is a sociologist and deputy head of the research department "Communication and Knowledge Dynamics in Space" at the IRS. Her research focuses on current developments in rural and urban spaces, social innovations, socio-spatial acceleration and deceleration, and European urban and regional policies.

to help social innovations in rural areas achieve a breakthrough. In the latency and problematisation phase, it is important that communication takes place at all. Spaces must be created for this, both digital (e.g. platforms) and "analogue" (e.g. meeting places in villages). In the development phase, the challenge is to find and address the right people who can drive a project forward and giving them resources. This requires networks and help in applying for funding. In the adjustment phase, teething problems are ironed out and a new solution is rolled out. This requires access to expertise, regulatory concessions - and financial support.

Speaking of money. Overall, there is enough project funding for rural areas. However, the funding landscape is mainly geared to economic sectors, such as tourism or agriculture. This is at odds with the logic of social innovations, which are similar across sectors and often link several areas, but differ greatly depending on the stage of development. Especially in the early phase, the actors usually lack knowledge about suitable funding programmes. Instead of demanding more funds for rural innovation support, we therefore recommend that the existing funding landscape be much more cross-sectoral and that material as well as immaterial measures (coaching, consulting, networking) be geared to the concrete needs of the people who drive innovative ideas in rural areas. Ideas still cannot be forced. But the chance that they will emerge can be increased. In future, their success should depend less on chance and more on their potential. ∎

"In the Countryside, the Social Component is more Important"

Coworking spaces, FabLabs, Maker Spaces and Repair Cafés – they all stand for new forms of joint working, partly economically motivated, partly driven by idealism, and for a new openness of access to working tools, both technical and organisational. For a long time, they were considered an urban phenomenon. Their spread began in the large metropolises. More recently, they are increasingly found in rural areas as well. A new Marie Sklodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network (ITN) funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 research programme is now looking at collaborative workplaces – the umbrella term for the facilities mentioned – in rural and peripheral regions: What distinguishes them from their urban counterparts? How can they improve living and working in rural areas? Under the direction of economic geographer Suntje Schmidt, the IRS is participating in the ITN CORAL, in which 15 Early Stage Researchers will work on their doctorates. In the interview, Schmidt explains what can be expected from the network.

Professor Schmidt, what is CORAL about?

It's about two things. The first is to ask, from a research perspective: What are and what characterises collaborative workplaces in rural and peripheral regions? What role do they play for gainful employment, and what potential do they have for regional development in a broader sense? Secondly, a Marie Curie network is always about practical training. Our network includes collaborative workplaces that bring an operational management perspective. All 15 Early Stage Researchers (ESR) will have practical placements or secondments. They should be able to work both in research and in practice afterwards. This practical orientation distinguishes an ITN from a graduate school, for example.

Rural coworking has already become a topic of public debate. How do you perceive this discussion?

Great hopes are placed on these facilities. The economic dimension is in the foreground. In my view, collabo-

Prof. Dr. Suntje Schmidt
Tel +49 3362 793-172
suntje.schmidt@leibniz-irs.de

Suntje Schmidt is acting head of the research department "Dynamics of Economic Spaces" at the IRS and at the same time junior professor for applied economic geography at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her research focuses on geographies of work, especially creative work and precarious labour markets, problem-driven innovation, and regional innovation policy.

rative workplaces can also contribute to social cohesion in the countryside, for example between the generations or between newcomers and old residents. The example of Alte Schule Letschin comes to mind – a place in the Oderbruch, just before the Polish border. There, a publicly supported coworking space was set up in an old school building. The manager invited everyone from Letschin to bring old school pictures. An exhibition was made of them. This not only created a place for newcomers or self-employed people from the region to work, but also brought in the old residents and created a meeting space. There is great potential in this.

Is this the approach or the contribution of CORAL to also shed light on the social dimension?

The added value of CORAL is that we approach the topic with an open mind and aks: What is happening in these places? What dynamics do we observe, what are the challenges of such places and how do they see themselves? One sub-project also deals with the gender

CoWorkLand is a cooperative network of coworking spaces in the countryside. It supports the establishment and operation of coworking spaces in rural areas.

perspective, an aspect that has been under-lit in research so far. Ultimately, it is about the question of openness and closure: who is involved here, who tends to be left out? Since these places have predominantly positive connotations in the discourse, it is also worth asking critically what contribution they really make and what that contribution looks like. From a political perspective, the question is: Can and should these places be promoted? If so, how? There is a work package in the network with several dissertations that deal with impact; mainly qualitatively, but partly also quantitatively. In the qualitative part of the work our focus is on the value and evaluation from the perspective of the regional actors.

Now, the category "collaborative workplaces" is very broad. It includes many different facilities such as FabLabs, Maker Spaces, Coworking Spaces, Repair Cafés. Is it even possible to summarise this diversity under one term?

It is a very diverse field, and the question of definition has not been definitively settled. One project in CORAL is to create a kind of typification for collaborative workplaces in rural regions. We expect, there is a consensus among the participants, that collaborative workplaces in rural areas have similarities with their urban counterparts, but that they also differ from them.

What is known about these similarities and differences?

We don't know that much about it yet. One well-known difference relates to the type of economisation. In cities, you often find chains like WeWork setting up coworking spaces. At the moment, it seems that in the countryside, a larger part of the places is still organised bottom-up, out of the needs of the supporting organisations and the operators. The social component is stronger, social entrepreneurship is a big topic.

"Collaborative workplaces can contribute to social cohesion in the countryside, for example between the generations or between newcomers and old residents."

We also expect to see differences in the types of activities that take place there.

Do different European countries have different perspectives and expectations of collaborative workplaces in the countryside, for example as social infrastructures?

According to my personal observation, the discourse in France, Italy and Greece has been going on a bit longer than here. The question of funding is also posed differently there. I think that in Germany and Austria there is more of a pragmatic approach: someone sees an opportunity, talks to the mayor or the cluster manager, and a solution is found. But there is no structured funding – yet. However, people are definitely thinking about whether larger coworking spaces in rural Brandenburg, for example, would be suitable for reducing commuter flows to Berlin. There is also a discussion about whether we need coworking spaces at railway stations. This is reinforced by the experiences we made in the pandemic.

What impact does the COVID 19 pandemic have on the discussion about such places?

We are talking about places where encounters are to be created, also through special formats – in other words, exactly what is not possible at the moment. Project partners from Italy and France report that a whole series of places have been closed. We ourselves had to find a new partner organisation from the field during the contract signing phase for CORAL, because one company in the consortium had not survived the pandemic. However, others report that new places were founded during the pandemic and that they function particularly well, possibly because they respond precisely to the needs of their users during the pandemic who, despite everything, need environments in which they can continue to work. The pandemic has made it even clearer that

in addition to an office at the company headquarters and the private home office, there must be other places where work can be organised safely and flexibly. In the long run, only the home office will not work, as many have painfully experienced in the pandemic, but the classic office is also increasingly being questioned, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

Where does Europe actually stand in this discussion? Were collaborative workplaces invented in Europe or did this idea "spill over" from somewhere else?

There are different explanations. Some see the origin of this movement in the Hacker Spaces of the Chaos Computer Club, some see the Free Workshops of the 1970s as the origin, and some point to the first coworking space in San Francisco. I would say that digitalisation and the development towards a knowledge society have simply created a need for new places to work, and that is why corresponding offers have sprung up almost everywhere in the world, especially in large cities.

Let's go back to the ITN CORAL: Why is the topic dealt with in the form of an EU-funded training network and not in another form?

There is another format, a COST* network1 on the geography of new places of work and their impact on peripheral spaces. CORAL emerged from this. The advantage of the practical training in CORAL is that we can approach an open question in a very broad and at the same time structured way. We bring together people who are already highly recognized with 15 young researchers who are new to the field and make new empirical contributions. That's a good way to open up a subject area about which little is known.

How would you describe the CORAL consortium?

The CORAL ITN is coordinated by Vasilis Avdikos from the Panteion University in Athens, a scientist who has distinguished himself in this research field for many years. In addition, other interdisciplinary scientific experts are involved in the consortium. I consider it a special added value of CORAL that the network is interdisciplinary with a strong economic component, also with quantitative research, and at the same time with a broad social science component. In addition, there are the practical partners, such as the European Creative HUB Network, Otelo or the Impact Hub as well as the Landesverband der Kultur- und Kreativwirtschaft Sachsen e.V. Such practice-oriented research fits very well with the Leibniz motto theoria cum praxi.

What role does the IRS play?

We will have two PhD students conducting research, one on the embedding of collaborative workplaces in translocal entrepreneurial ecosystems and the other on the role of places in regional development, including how their value can be measured and to what extent they could or should be promoted. As Work Package Lea-

ders for the WP Training, we will also monitor and follow the progress of ESR across the network. We also co-developed the CORAL Schools, where doctoral researchers will exchange ideas, receive content-related impulses and develop many important skills for their research, such as how to create a research design or how to present research results in a way that is appropriate for the target audience. There will be a total of four CORAL Schools, which will be supplemented by further workshops and "knowledge exchange days". We will also welcome two ESRs from the network as temporary guest researchers, as all young researchers complete guest stays at other institutions in the network for their research as well as for practical learning.

What specific competencies does the IRS bring to the table?

We bring our Open Region approach, i.e. our knowledge of networks of relationships in regions and beyond regions. In the two research projects on entrepreneurial ecosystems and on regional development that we are supervising, we will not only pay attention to the embeddedness of collaborative workplaces in the region, but also to their embeddedness in wider relationships. In addition, we bring experience from our own work on collaborative workplaces, for example on the typification of Open Creative Labs or on the question of how these places contribute to resilience in volatile labour markets. In addition, we bring our methodological expertise in qualitative empirical social research and generally our spatio-temporal research perspective.

"The pandemic has made it even clearer that in addition to an office at the company headquarters and the private home office, there must be other places where work can be organised safely and flexibly."

What does the network want to achieve in practice, what knowledge transfer should there be?

ZOn the one hand, we have practice organisations in the network that are actively involved in all phases of the research process. They will interpret the results for themselves and then reflect on their own working practice. In addition, they participate in the further training for the ESRs, for example on project management or the development of business ideas. At the end of the term, there will also be two policy days where we will discuss results with representatives of local politics and regional development and evaluate them from their point of view.

What happens next?

We have just recruited all 15 ESRs and they will start work at the institutes in September. Also in September, there will be a first get-to-know-you meeting, then still digital. We may also hold the first CORAL School in January virtually. However, the following meetings and especially the guest stays will take place physically again. ∎
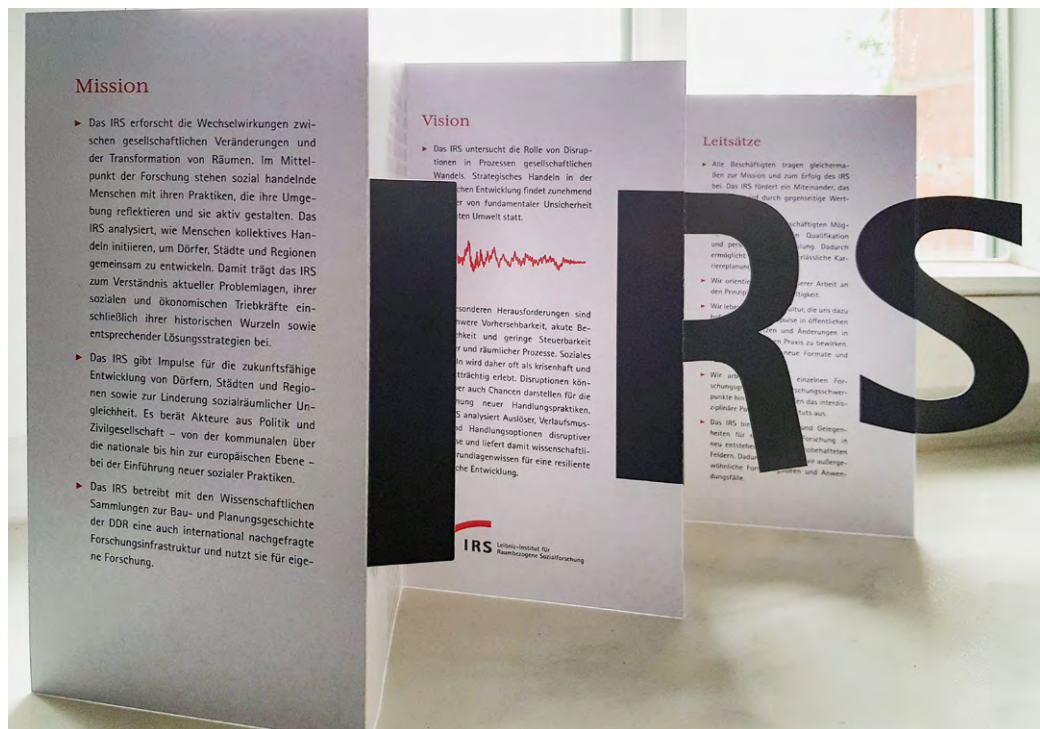
IRS Adopts New Mission Statement

Die Mitgliederversammlung des IRS The General Assembly of the IRS adopted the new mission statement of the IRS in April 2021. For the first time, it sums up the research agenda of the Institute and at the same time describes a vision for the future as well as guidelines for the actions of all employees on the way there. It formulates the IRS's claim to combine excellent research with an energetic transfer of knowledge into practice, politics and civil society. The development process of the mission statement began in autumn 2019 and is part of an overarching strategy process with which the Institute is positioning itself for the future. It encompasses all fields of activity of the IRS, from research and knowledge transfer to personnel matters, organisation and digital administration, and the question of how the Institute's work can be made more sustainable.

The mission statement is divided into a mission, a vision and guiding principles for its practical implementation.

Mission

The IRS researches the interactions between social changes and the transformation of spaces. Its research focuses on people as social actors, who reflect on their environment and actively shape it, and on their practices. The IRS ana-lyses how people initiate collective action to develop villages, cities and regions together. In this way, the IRS contributes to the understan-ding of current problems, their social and eco-nomic drivers including their historical roots, as well as corresponding solution strategies. The IRS provides impulses for the sustainable development of villages, cities and regions and for the alleviation of socio-spatial inequality. It advises actors from politics and civil society - from the municipal to the national to the Euro-pean level - on the introduction of new social practices. With the Scientific Collections for the History of Building and Planning in the GDR, the IRS operates a research infrastructure that is also in international demand and uses it for its own research.

Vision

The IRS investigates the role of disruption in processes of social change. Strategic action in spatial development increasingly takes place in an environment characterised by fundamental UNCERTAINTY. The particular challenges are the limited predictability, acute threatening nature and low level of control of social and spatial processes. Social action is therefore often experienced as crisis-ridden and conflict-prone. However, disruptions can also represent opportunities for the emergence of novel practices. The IRS analyses the triggers and patterns of and the options for action within disruptive processes. It thus advances the state of scientific knowledge of resilient spatial development

Contact:
Prof. Dr. Oliver Ibert
Tel +49 3362 793 118
oliver.ibert@leibniz-irs.de

Guiding principles

- All employees contribute equally to the mission and success of the IRS. The IRS promotes a spirit of togetherness based on mutual respect.
- The IRS offers all employees opportunities for professional qualification and personal development. In this way, the IRS enables reliable career planning.
- We are guided in our work by the principles of sustainability.
- We live a culture of transfer that enables us to set important impulses in public debates and bring about changes in societal practice. To this end, we develop new formats and communication channels.
- We work across the individual research groups and research foci and exploit the interdisciplinary potential of the Institute.
- The IRS offers freedom and opportunities for proactive research in emerging, even risky fields. This enables us to develop extraordinary research ideas and applications. ∎