Rural Futures

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30 different views on city-countryside relations

Editors' Note

Anna Hofmann spent her childhood in the countryside and now enjoys exploring rural areas in all kinds of activities related to her work, leisure and family life. She looks to the rural periphery for inspiration on how to live well in the urban centers of the future.

Matthias Koch, based in a city yet fond of the countryside, is convinced that we must cross the rural-urban divide. He works as a project manager at the research and scholarship department at the ZEIT-Stiftung.

Dear readers,

What is your image of rural areas and what do you think the future holds for them? The countryside is often defined as land away from large towns and cities, in contrast to urban density. As a result, it appears as the supposed opposite of progress and prosperity. In popular belief, it often is a place of conservation – of natural resources, picturesque landscapes, and traditional values. How do these representations, rooted in history and culture, influence our contemporary understanding of the role of the countryside and rural populations in ongoing change – whether environmental or economic, political, and/or social?

As part of our mission to create open spaces, provide orientation, and defend freedoms, we at ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin and Gerd Bucerius regard the interplay of urban influence and rural areas as one of the key developing fields for civil society.

Together with its partners, the ZEIT-Stiftung organized a series of workshops and a summer school in 2021 and 2022 whose aim was to shed light on rural areas in all their diversities. We invited international scholars, practitioners, and local actors to gather in small towns and villages - Homberg (Efze), Burgtiefe (Fehmarn), and Sankelmark (Schleswig). Here, we discussed the heritage and perspectives of rural areas in the face of globalization. With the help of this interdisciplinary and diverse group, we sought to overcome the polarized image of a rural-urban divide. The common goal of all the institutions and individuals involved in our endeavor was to strengthen rural voices in academic and public debate.

The magazine "Rural Futures" draws directly from our encounters and explorations in the countryside and shows how important and timely it is to build and communicate a new understanding: Not only is the countryside changing drastically in different regions of the world, becoming more and more disconnected from its local social context and natural resources, as critical assessments underline, but also, rural contributions to building a sustainable future are essential to solving the most demanding issues of our time, such as environmental challenges and climate change. Local projects and initiatives can have an impact both regionally and far afield.

Informed by their research or practical work in administration, businesses, or civil society, the contributors discuss representations of the countryside and its functions, rural developments, local initiatives, and identities. We hope you will be inspired, and we look forward to your feedback! Together, let us reflect on the future of the countryside. Let us search for new ways to balance globalization, growth, and sustainability across the urban-rural divide and create opportunities for a good life in rural areas.

Your Rural Futures editorial team at the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius

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Why rural futures ?

A collaborative exercise in futures literacy

As a program lead for Future-Oriented Land Use at the Toepfer Foundation, **Klara Stumpf** engages with the rural in a variety of ways, from sustainable agriculture, forestry, and nature protection, to fostering democratic debates on the necessary transformations in the rural through theater and community projects.

Luis Rieken is a project manager at the research and scholarship department at the ZEIT-Stiftung and wants to challenge the urban mindset in the discourses on rural futures. He is convinced that there are plenty of things cities and rural areas can learn from each other.

Rural areas are changing drastically. They are also diverse in history, landscape, and future outlooks. Hence, just as we acknowledge the plurality of rural areas, we acknowledge that there is not one future but multiple *rural futures*.

Practicing one's *futures literacy* means developing the capability to imagine multiple and diverse futures. In a workshop at last year's Summer School on "Rural Futures," we focused on this direction in a set of exercises. In small groups and using creative methods, we tried to reveal our pre-existing assumptions about the futures of rural areas, reframe narratives of the future, and rethink and question our practices and policies in the present. We started by drawing a discursive landscape of the present, picturing issues, narratives, and topics that rural areas face today and that invite criticism. Next, we moved on to formulating our prognoses for *probable* futures in 2032. The next step was to challenge the assumptions behind these prognoses and think about what could change if we modified some of the assumptions: which *possible* or *emergent* futures could we imagine? Finally, we came up with visions for good, flourishing, or desirable rural futures and discussed first steps that could lead us there. These visions range from a more sustainable and just agricultural system and community owned energy projects to a sufficient infrastructure that serves local needs. Together, we developed a sense of agency – as researchers, practitioners or just as humans living in rural areas.

Riel Miller, Head of Futures Literacy (UNESCO), and others argue that we are constantly "using" the future. It is in the present that we make decisions for the future, based on scientific data, narratives, assumptions, ideals, and perceptions. Through anticipation and planning, we try to eliminate uncertainty and "optimize" the future, somehow pulling it towards the present. These decisions have implications for the kinds of futures that come into being, as we push the present towards manifesting them. With regard to rural futures, in particular, this would have to take into consideration that narratives of rurality are often rooted in the past, thereby implying a sense of stability and certainty. Uncertainty, however, is a necessary and, indeed, productive aspect of imagining futures in the plural – and that counts for rural areas, too. In our discussions, we gathered from a broad variety of experiences and perspectives, many of which you'll be inspired by on the following pages. Once again: What do rural futures look like to you? ■

Impressions

David Laubmaier was the photographer during the summer school and the workshop. He perceives it as a privilege to have grown up in the countryside in southern Germany. He later moved to the city to become a photographer. You will find some of his pictures in this magazine.

The summer school on “Rural Futures“ took place at the “Akademiezentrum Sankelmark“ in the German-Danish border region close to the Sankelmarker See. It prolonged and continued the idea of the workshops “StadtLandZukunft,” which took place in Homberg (Efze) in 2021, and “Modern Provinces,” which took place on the island of Fehmarn in 2022. ■

| Impressions

Ideas and narratives about villages and ruralities are almost always located in the past and are subject to a distinct urban-rural contrast. In the dominating discourses, rural areas are generally seen as backwards and on the decline, and prosperity and progress only occur in urban areas. But those appearances are deceptive. Rural areas are diverse in their history, landscape and future outlooks. They are changing drastically and their role as a paradigm of ecological and social transformation is becoming ever more visible. ■

Impressions

Excursions were part of the summer school. One tour included the town of Højer, located in the southwest of Sønderjyllands Amt in Denmark. Host Maria Lottrup informed the group about the results of Denmark's largest development project: the TMI -Tønder Marsk Initiative.■

Impressions

For the past few decades, the idea of centralization has dominated the political economic discourse. Nowadays, there is a noticeable shift in attention to rural areas and the countryside as a resource. In times of climate crisis, we need to transform how we live, produce food and energy, and transport goods and people while protecting the environment and biodiversity. Rural areas play a critical role in climate policy and socio-ecological transformation. ■

| Impressions

The sea resort of Burgtiefe on Fehmarn was part of the international traveling exhibition “Gesamtkunstwerke – Architecture by Arne Jacobsen and Otto Weitling in Germany,” and the workshop “Modern Provinces.” The central goals of the exhibition are to mediate architecture and to make it experienceable. Consequently, the curators Jan Dimog and Hendrik Bohle exhibited either in buildings designed by both Danes, or in buildings that represent the German-Danish connection. The “Haus des Gastes” (“Guest House”) in Fehmarn is part of a huge resort, designed by Jacobsen and Weitling in the 1960s. For the exhibition, the building – which is in need of rehabilitation – was reactivated as a cultural space after years of vacancy and neglect. Many residents and tourists visited the pop-up exhibition. ■

“I believe that cultural landscape should not be understood as scenery, but as a productive and lively environment.”

© Heiko Dreher

Luis Rieken in conversation with Ines Lüder about territorial characters and identities of rural regions.

Ines, you grew up in the city of Lübeck in Northern Germany and became an architect. Lübeck is a small city with a lot of historic buildings and a rich cultural heritage. How did that influence you personally?

The richness and quality of architecture and urban space in Lübeck have always fascinated me. I first became aware of the iconic expressiveness of the Holstentor (Holsten Gate) in school. Later, in university, I carried out typological investigations of the characteristic merchant’s house. For my diploma, I traveled to Riga to explore the Baltic region, especially the eastern part. I believe that becoming aware of the similarity of architectonic characteristics in this area made me realize the value of regionally anchored cultural landscape. But the most impressing occurrences that I can remember and that influenced me in becoming an architect were the many visits to the Louisiana museum near Copenhagen during my childhood and looking at New York City from the Empire State Building when I was 16 – which is interesting, because the latter represents ultimate urbanity, while the former is an example of connecting buildings with landscapes.

How would you describe the interrelation of architecture and territorial character in rural regions (in Northern Germany)?

The built environment – buildings and infrastructures – is a relevant part of territories and landscapes. I believe that cultural landscape should not be understood as scenery, but as a productive and lively environment. For a longer time than in cities, cultural landscapes in rural areas have been characterized by vernacular structures, but this has radically changed in the past decades. We can observe new territorial logics as well as more hybrid, complex, and more generically built structures, overlaying each other without much linkage. This transformation has not been planned, it just happened, and it poses a lot of new challenges to rural areas.

In your research, you describe historical rural buildings as a territorial resource. What do you mean by that?

I believe that it is worth discussing the relevance of historical settlement structures and their buildings for present and future regional characteristics. Even if these structures seem outdated today, they should be looked at as a resource. The past

decades have shown a substantial loss of buildings. In regions with scattered settlements, this can mean that these historical spots are lost forever both in terms of housing or production and in the landscape. I state that, if a region wants to keep and develop its built character, we need new approaches.

What would have to change in order to achieve this?

For example, I propose a different reading of the old building. The predominant scientific perspective is to understand it in a retrospective way as cultural good, resulting in a demand for conservation. Focusing on the usage, I showed that a main feature of these building types has always been their functional and architectural adaptability. Provided there were different legal and cultural conditions, a new, progressive approach should allow for much more architectural invention and typological alteration.

You worked in a BMBF-research project on “Regiobranding”. Could you describe this concept and its importance?

The idea is to discuss a region’s characteristics and the values of its cultural landscape especially from the inhabitants’ point of view. The goal is to increase a sense of belonging and of collectively engaging in developing these characteristics, along with qualities in the built environment and quality of life. I learned that a cultural landscape is not only an artifact but also a process, a space of action, a commons for a region.

How can rural regions develop or regain an identity of their own?

> **“We must think in an interdisciplinary way about concepts and structures that are more integrative, interlinked, liveable, beautiful, healthy, and sustainable.”**

I interpret identity as uniqueness and as a kind of common idea tied to qualities and goals. It cannot be established by looking only to the past, but by linking past, present and future and thereby finding sustainable solutions to the questions of our time. Places and regions can and should develop new stories to tell and projects to realize and thereby build up self-awareness and liveable spaces. In the end, however, the borders of any unique ‘region’ and their identity will always be blurry.

What is your main takeaway from this year’s summer school on “Rural Futures”?

Ines Lüder Although I have lived in Berlin for a long time and like it very much, I am fascinated by the changes in rural areas. As an architect, I am particularly interested in the built environment and building culture - here I see a need for design and action on the part of our profession.

It became obvious for me that pointing out the aspect of ‘future’ seems a very worthwhile approach. Creative professions play a relevant part in such discussions about future scenarios and aims. Personally, I will try to use the work of my students in rural areas in Lower Saxony more strategically as visions of the future to be discussed with communities.

What can a sustainable rural future look like and what needs to be done to achieve it?

We must think in an interdisciplinary way about concepts and structures that are more integrative, interlinked, livable, beautiful, healthy, and sustainable. This is a design task – in confronting it, many stakeholders must be included. Among the many issues in need of addressing are stopping soil sealing, discussing our way of settling, making use of existing built structures and adapting them to contemporary uses, decreasing consumption of resources, and establishing local/regional cycles. In everything, the relation between infrastructure and landscape is key: For example, we need to design beautiful photovoltaic systems that are well integrated into the territorial surroundings ■

“Whatever we do, it is always with and for the people living in the rural areas.”

Luis Rieken in conversation with Annette Thuesen and Egon Noe about territorial characters and identities of rural regions.

So the first question is to the both of you. What would you say is the most pressing issue for rural areas today? Annette, would you start?

ANNETTE THUESEN: Oh, yes. In Denmark, we have the political issue that young people move away from rural areas. So, we have a situation where a lot of rural municipalities have a very high net migration of young people. And it is a bit uphill for them to have these people come back. So, the politicians have started to move out educational institutions or at least specific educations that they find match the local or the regional job markets. I think this brain drain is a common problem for many rural areas all over the world, actually.

EGON NOE: Yeah. And to add to that, what we see is a segregation closely linked to this. It already has a huge impact, but looking at recent years you can see an increase in inequality and segregation not just in terms of social dimensions, but much more geographically.

Egon, you work at the Center for Rural Research. Can you briefly outline your work, and can you also say how people living and working in rural areas profit or benefit from it?

EN: Yes, we are doing a quite diverse research. I mean, we’re looking at rural youth and the migration of young people, and at how to stimulate cultural activity and the rural youth to participate and to have ownership in this. And then we are doing research on strategic planning, which is also Annette’s area, on public-private cooperation and how to maintain public goods and public services in rural areas. We also do health-related research on how to compensate for the centralization of the health system and its effects, especially for the elderly population. We also worked on the housing market and the possibilities for getting mortgage loans. Whatever we do, it is always with and for the people living in the rural areas. They are the main target. We are looking for solutions that could improve their livelihood in one way or another. We target relevant policies, but also support the local actors.

AT: Yeah, for example, a colleague has been leading a large project about collective land management, where different actors from a larger area collectively come up with ways to improve the management of the land in relation to the villages, the farmers, and the environment. It turned into a large national project that has impacted policies as well. This colleague also conducted another project together with a large foundation about quality of life in rural areas. The data shows that it is better in rural than in urban areas. This is remarkable, given the fact that people there earn less money and might not have enjoyed the same education.

How do the municipalities or the state try to tackle those issues in comparison to the local communities

and actors from the civil society? And why is it important to have an engaged civil society and how can we strengthen it?

AT: There is this concept of governance capacity, which consists of both the capacities of the locals, the villages, the voluntary associations, and the capacity of public authorities and the municipalities. The main idea is that you need a combination of both in order to solve some of the larger issues in society. In Denmark, a larger share of the municipalities has had their own policies for rural development. In fact, for two years now it has been obligatory for municipalities to have a plan for so-called viable villages. We interviewed almost 40 municipalities and most of them have developed a good plan in cooperation with the active local communities. But two municipalities stood out: They turned the approach around and went to the villages that they did not hear back from. And it will be very interesting to see what will come out of that.

EN: The further you get away from the municipality centers, the stronger the role of the civil societies is to make sure that there is development and a rural livelihood. And I think a lot of people are aware of that. So, you see a strong engagement in lots of villages and small cities in trying to develop things...

AT: ...and we have data on that, actually. We also tried to develop a new social capital connection. From our survey data from all Danish village associations, we can see some patterns in relation to who has what is called bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. For example, the linking social capital is needed in order to establish links to different actors outside of your community. In Denmark, the discussions about windmills and solar panels are really approaching the village level. And if you are not a strong village in terms of social capital, then it could be harder to get the results and benefits out of all these energy planning initiatives for the local community.

> „Basically, though, the rural-urban divide is something in our minds and not necessarily something that is connected to the actual number of kilometers in between.“

What is problematic about the center-and-periphery dichotomy in the dominant discourses, including in politics – namely the politics of centralization?

EN: Oh, this is a huge question. But the first thing, and one of the main problems, that comes into my mind is that in the narrative of our society, we don't have a strong role of the periphery. If you interview a city dweller, they do not have a strong idea of what is going on outside the cities. I think that we need a shared understanding that cities and rural areas are dependent on each other. And the politics of centralization are, on the one hand, driven by technology and an economy of scale. On the other hand, though, is the idea that the future lies with the cities and that the open land is just for spare time and pleasure, energy production and so on.

AT: But of course, we also see some changes due to Covid-19 and due to the changes in the economic activity in our society. Some people from Copenhagen are actually moving out to rural areas. Due to good fiber connections, it is possible to keep your job in the city and live in a rural area. And of course, Denmark is a very small country. Basically, though, the rural-urban divide is something in our minds and not necessarily something that is connected to the actual number of kilometers in between.

EN: Well, I agree completely. It's not a matter of physical distances. I mean, compared to other countries in similar situations, there should not be a rural-urban divide in Denmark.

AT: But we also had elections where that kind of kicked back to Copenhagen. Afterwards, even the one party that had gone against moving educational institutions to rural areas evaluated that maybe they, too, should start to talk more about rural areas. And as Egon said, we have more and more segregation in places where people live together with people who look like and have the same education as themselves. The rural areas normally have been very diverse. And today they are becoming even more diverse because new populations from other countries, Eastern Europe for example, are moving in. Different from the people coming from Copenhagen, these people are, to a large extent, attached to agriculture and the agricultural sector. So, a lot of things are going on.

How can local societies be reconnected to places and maybe develop an identity of their own again?

EN: Again, this is a good question. I think that there are different kinds of disconnection. For example, you have this disconnection between agriculture and rural communities, mainly due to the economy of scale and the enlargement of agricultural farms. At the same time, there is a lot of potential for renewed connection between the open land and the rural population. I have one project where I worked with rural branding. One part of it is identity building:

Who are we as a rural community? What kind of values are significant for our area? What would make it a good place for us to live? Building a rural identity has a double purpose, not only to attract people from the outside, but also to be more conscious about what makes this area a nice place. Also, if young people had a good rural childhood, then they are more likely to come back. And these returners often have a new view on their own home. So that's a kind of reconnection process that is going on.

AT: And we see more and more municipalities trying to take care of the fact that young people feel a sense of belonging to the municipality where they were brought up, even though they live in the larger cities now. The question is, how can they keep in touch during their educational years when at some point in the future they may want to come back?

EN: And I mean, it's a complex situation. For example, the facilities are key, if there are good schools, daycares and so on. Public services and infrastructure need to be sufficient for people to move or stay there. The housing market is also critical, because since the financial crisis it has been very difficult to obtain an additional mortgage loan in rural areas. Also, there are a lot of houses that need to be renovated in terms of sustainability.

What are your main takeaways from this year's Summer School on "Rural Futures," not only from the exchange with other scholars and practitioners from Germany, but also from beyond?

AT: It was nice to experience all the diversity and at the same time to see the interlinkages in all of the projects. It was very inspiring to talk to all these very enthusiastic people, and to get out after a long period of Covid-19 and have these discussions. Rural research is somehow very English dominated, so it was very interesting to meet with so many Germans from different institutions and to hear about their perspectives.

And Egon, what are your main takeaways?

EN: I completely agree with Annette. I mean, both to learn that we are not that different in many issues. But also, I think it's always very, very fruitful to be able to mirror your own case to see that. You learn quite a lot about your own biases, your own situation that way. So, for me this was quite valuable and interesting. And also, not only to get to know different contexts but also different perspectives. When you include architecture, art, and all the other aspects, it enriches your picture quite a lot. Rural areas, rural development, and the rural-urban divide are all multifaceted topics, so you cannot just observe it from one perspective or one angle.

Maybe the last question, and I know it's a big one: What could a sustainable future look like and what needs to be done to achieve it?

EN: That's a good question (laughs).

AT: I think it's important that when you are initiating projects, for example these large scale energy projects that will have a huge impact on rural areas in the future, that you start them in the right way, that you have the right citizen engagement processes, and that local areas aren't the financial losers in these large investment projects. And I think that due to the energy crisis, rural areas actually gain new value. More people need rural areas, and if we do not handle it in a smart, democratic and citizen-engaged way, then we will have these kickbacks to the National Parliament over and over again.

EN: Yeah, I agree. And I think that the necessary green transition, in terms of energy, of food and of how to treat the open land, constitutes a tremendous chance for a rural livelihood. Still, it could also end up the opposite way. I think how we deal with this is absolutely critical. And I think that at the discursive level it's important that we reestablish the idea that it's worth investing, for example, outside London. Looking at venture capital and the big investment funds, it's obvious that they have completely abandoned rural areas and have just been focused on city centers. We must reunderstand that there is potential for economic growth and for a good economy outside the centers – and that we need that because, at the end of the day, you can't eat the assets in your house. You need food, you need people around you, you need a society that works. ■

Annette Thuesen was born in a rural area and has been used to the rhythm of rural life. After obtaining her education, she moved back to the countryside.

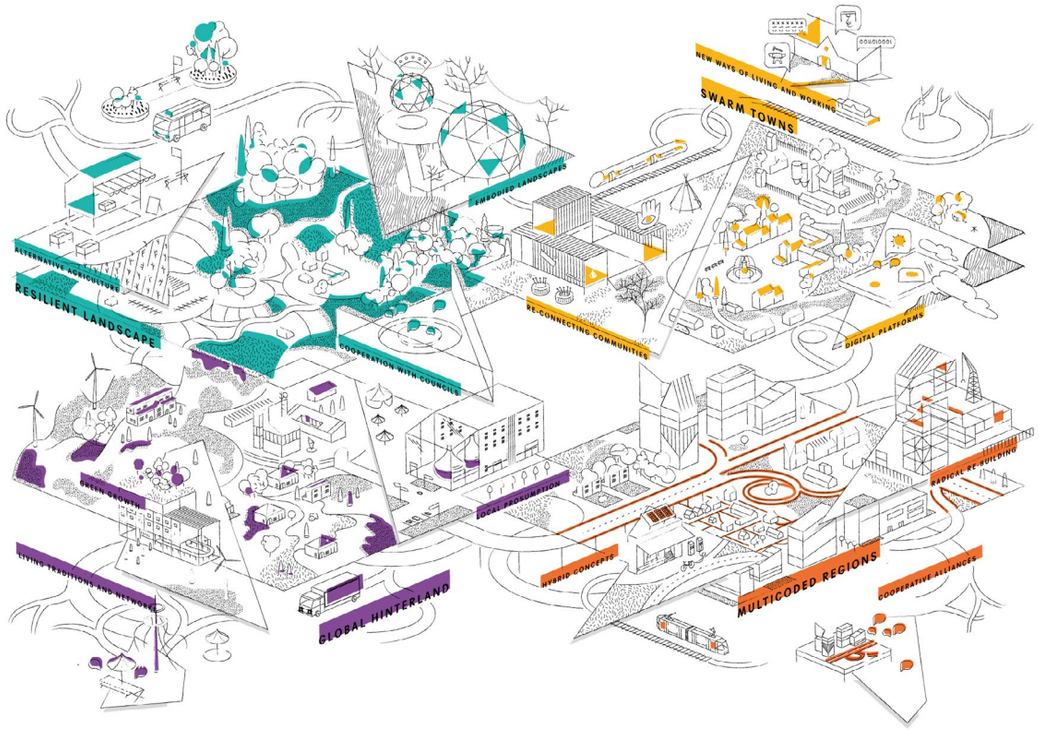
Egon Noe was raised on a farm and has been a farmer for the first 20 years of his life. As much as he loves to go to Copenhagen for one or two days, he is even more keen on getting home again.

Ambivalent Ruralities

There is a certain over-simplified, black and white understanding of rural areas that can be observed both in public and political discussions and perceptions: Among other clichés, rural areas are perceived to be places where one goes to really touch base again and live the “authentic, harmonic, unpretentious life.” Along these lines, rural areas are where progress and an open society are perceived to be stymied – places where one is supposedly confronted with simple-minded characters and uncivilized manners. Obviously, things are more complex than these stereotypes imply. For a long time and for several reasons, rural areas have been represented and perceived as unambiguous spaces, characterized by either natural harmony or social backwardness. Consequently, they are frequently seen in stark contrast to urban spaces, which are themselves portrayed as embodying either anonymity and social coldness or civilization and progress. Besides falling short of understanding the multifacetedness of social spaces, these imaginary stereotypes turn a blind eye towards the existing social, political, and cultural ambivalence of rural areas across the globe. By contrast, discussing and designing rural futures, shedding light on this ambivalence, as the following texts do, allows for a more nuanced understanding of rural areas and steers clear of both their idealization and devaluation. Such an unprejudiced perspective of the countryside’s ambivalence would not only avoid both its idealization and demonization. It would also allow for determining the actual adequacy of some of those positive or negative stereotypes, as well as their effects on people. ■

Spatial Constellations

A compass for building the future



Reflecting and transferring knowledge: visualizing spatial constellations

The Thünen-Institute for Regional Development and studio amore (Leon Jank, Eleonore Harmel) were commissioned by the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius to investigate what a successful relationship between town and country can look like, what factors play a role in this – and whether this newness is already visible. They fanned out in all directions throughout Germany and visited places, people, and their projects.

There is no one right way for a region to shape its future. What is key for any region, though, is recognizing its strengths, leveraging resources that have hitherto been overlooked, and prompting people from all sorts of backgrounds to come together and take others on this journey. Also, the future of urban-rural relations cannot be grasped by separating the romantic imaginaries of metropolitan creativity and rural emptiness.

We envisioned four types of spatial constellations that help understand and shape the urban-rural interrelatedness, while not being assigned to specific regions. At their core, each of them focuses on the single most important factor of transformation: an inspiring resource. These resources range from green growth (global hinterland) to a network of infrastructures (multicoded regions), from mental and physical open spaces (swarm towns) to the landscape (resilient landscapes). Let's take a look at them individually:

Resilient landscapes are found in the sparsely populated regions, far from the big cities. Here, the landscape is a valuable resource for the future, telling us: Only if we live and work more sustainably and shape our environment in harmony with nature can we be fit for the future. Swarm towns are booming as hinges between city and country – if they have a connection to the big city. Here, new alliances and experimental places of urban and regional development for the common good are emerging. The global hinterland describes regions "in-between," where cities become villages, single-family homes line up, industrial zones stretch endlessly, and "hidden champions" are blooming. Here, both positive and negative aspects of two worlds merge into a new spatial assemblage. Multicoded regions form a dense network, an interrelation between what we call "city" and "country." Where spatial density, the suburban, local recreation, and agriculture coexist, these terms lose their identity of mutual exclusion. Here, diversity, infrastructures, and a new "we" are adjusting screws for robust futures. ■

We are fed up!

Towards social and ecological justice in food systems

Activists in front of the hay bales holding up banners with logos of their agrarian and food movements and diverse demands for agrarian change.

Agrarwende Jetzt! On a cold Saturday morning in January 2022, a huge protest sign made of hay bales sits in front of the German Parliament in Berlin, translating to "agrarian change now." These words signify a rural struggle and demand, materialized in the urban landscape. Later, farmers on tractors and activists with banners make their way to the hay barricade, making noise and urging politicians and citizens to finally take action in agrarian future developments.

"Rural landscapes are a place of potential and serenity for me – when I am outside of the city I feel more creative and connected to myself."
Lea Loretta Zentgraf

These activists are part of the Wir haben es satt! [We are fed up!] initiative. Every January, agrarian and food movements assemble in Berlin to protest. Since its beginnings in 2011, more than 55 supporting organizations have joined the coalition. The diverse alliance – farmers, environmental movements, animal welfare organizations, the global food justice movement, NGOs, etc. – demands an environmentally and socially more just and sustainable food system in Germany and worldwide. Over the years, the demonstrations have mobilized between 18,000 and 50,000 people from all over Germany. In 2020, 27,000 occupied the streets of Berlin.

Inequalities and injustices in global food chains – exacerbated by the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian war in Ukraine – make the need for a change in food systems increasingly urgent and visible. In the polarized debate about sustainable agriculture, peasants have an often-ambivalent role. On one hand, they are criticized as being responsible for many negative impacts, while on the other, they act as agents of change for a more sustainable and resilient system. To confront this polarization and to enact new food politics, environmental protection, social justice, and agriculture must finally be seen in their relation to each other.

These struggles are part of rural realities and affect people differently. However, there are also more and more bridges being built between the rural and the urban that have the transformative potential to enact systemic change in local food systems. For example, consumers are assuming responsibility and help shaping the agricultural and food transition through direct producer and consumer relations, as one can see in the Solidarity Agriculture Network. This and many more initiatives show us existing solutions and practices and should guide politicians, economists, and civil society in their actions towards socially and ecologically just food systems. ■

Uprooted

In the woods of rural Sweden, the country's reputation of prodigious sustainability takes a hit

Jonathan Rahn "When talking about climate change mitigation or the threat to biodiversity, we tend to have these discussions in urban centers and stay often within a very technical perspective. During my studies, however, I came to learn that the arena that these changes actually play out in the rural arena, making it crucial to consider this space."

Sweden is "the forest land," with vast woodlands, and connections to the forest run deep in its society. Forest walks, berry picking, and mushroom collecting are very popular recreational activities. Half of the woodland is owned by roughly 300,000 private citizens, equivalent to 3% of all Swedes. Many people are likely to have some relative that owns a patch of forest. As a country, Sweden is commonly understood to be a leader in sustainability and has pioneered certification schemes in sustainable forestry. Yet, in recent times, significant damage has been inflicted on this public image.

Within Sweden, a battle is being waged about the future of the forests. In this turmoil, it is important to know that Swedish forestry is almost exclusively based on "trakthyggesbruk," popularly called "clearcuts." During those, a large forest patch is cut down, the soil is torn up, and genetically identical, optimized trees are planted instead, resulting in optimized growing rates. The industrial needs of Sweden's paper industry – owned by the forestry industry – for more raw material has grown to such a large size that more and more previously uncut forests are converted into these plantations. This is not only bad for the climate and a disaster for biodiversity, but also a threat to the livelihoods of Sweden's indigenous population, the Sámi. Being reindeer herders, for them old forests are the last resort for fodder during a hard winter. While we commonly define a hard winter by its freezing temperatures, for the Sámi, it is the opposite: When it's too warm outside, snow melts and re-freezes repeatedly, creating an ice-layer impenetrable for reindeer.

How did we get here? It's complicated. First of all, private owners do not manage the forest themselves. Instead, they are organized in large cooperatives that carry out the work for them–and these cooperatives also own paper mills. Secondly, extractive forestry has fueled Swedish initial economic growth historically, boosting its social status. Lastly, it is pride on past achievements–Sweden managed to increase both timber export and tree cover using this system. Right now, however, this system is being challenged more and more: The EU is pushing climate and biodiversity initiatives, environmental and indigenous groups are protesting, mass media interest is growing. Even within the broader forestry community, "hyggesfria," or clearcut-free methods, are being seriously discussed for the first time in 60 years. ■

The Belt

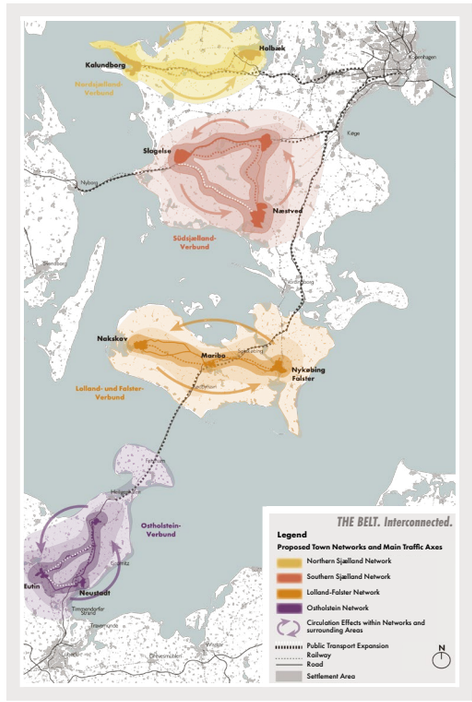
A spatial image for sustainable transformation of the German-Danish Belt region

Nora Ebbers is a geographer and future urban planner. She sees the rural area as a space of potential for solving current social and ecological problems and for developing innovative approaches.

Mara Thiry holds a bachelor's degree in architecture and is currently studying urban planning. She regards it as important to preserve the rural heritage so that valuable natural space can be ensured for future generations.

Joel Rodriguez Richardson holds a bachelor's degree in urban and regional planning. He is convinced that understanding and advancing regional building culture helps rural areas strengthen their local identity and attractiveness as places to live and as tourist destinations.

01



02

Europe is growing together, its economic space continuously strengthened by a variety of border crossing infrastructural projects. Between Hamburg and Copenhagen, the Fehmarn Belt tunnel is being developed to further connect the two metropolises. The new underwater connection opens up a unique potential of development for the emerging multinational Belt region. The fate of a variety of living spaces depends on its nuanced usage.

With the goal of demonstrating such sustainable and future-oriented nuances, a project in the Master's degree program "Urban Planning" at the Technical University of Lübeck brought forward different spatial images illustrating a transformation of the German-Danish Belt region. All these visions, of which we name three, are based on approaches of post-growth and ecological sustainability.

"The Belt Interconnected" is focused on aligning metropolitan and rural living conditions by providing easy access to the necessities of everyday life within highly developed town networks. It uses the new corridor as an interconnecting link. Its vision is one of a lively and diverse Belt region with high economic and innovative power.

"Wildnis wagen! Neue Balance zwischen Natur und Urbanität" ("Venturing into the wild! New balance between nature and urbanity") aims to promote wild and biodiverse nature as well as lively, urban, yet green cities. "Rewilding" – an innovative concept of nature protection – is at its core. Rural spaces are regarded as ecological capital and as laboratories, enabling and shaping innovation.

"Rurbane Landschaften" ("Rurban Landscapes") deals with shaping the relationship between the urban and the rural, so that a polycentral space may emerge. Its purpose is to develop infrastructure in remote regions, along with green spaces in densely populated areas, creating a balanced region of urban and rural areas.

Without profoundly changing the diverse identities in the region, all spatial images aim to ensure that the quality of life in the city and in the countryside converge over time. Strengthening positive qualities and balancing deficits will bring forth a future-oriented Belt region. ■

03

04

Illustration 01: Rurban Landscapes. Spatial Image
(Milan Bogojevic, Svenja Lubinski, Svenja Müller, Mara Thiry)

Illustration 02: The Belt.Interconnected. Spatial Image
(Katharina Pötzsch, Joel Rodriguez Richardson,
Tanja Schwalme, Wiebke Warfia, Josefin Weyer)

Illustration 03: Daring Wilderness. Conceptual Approach
(Nora Franziska Ebbers, Michael Handschuck, Marielle Klemt,
Christian Schönekeß)

Illustration 04: Daring Wilderness. Differentiated Spatial Image
(Nora Franziska Ebbers, Michael Handschuck, Marielle Klemt,
Christian Schönekeß)

Strategic Idylls

Visual regimes of the rura

In many countries of the global north, a dynamic "countryside industry" has established itself through magazines, TV shows, and novels that rely on rural idylls. Their visuals and stories revolve around a core of ideas, as described by British cultural geographer David Bell, of a "better past, traditional peasantry, unspoilt nature, family and community".

Manuel Trummer works as a senior lecturer for Cultural Anthropology at the University of Regensburg. He was born and raised in the Bavarian countryside where he moved back in 2019.

From a cultural-anthropological perspective, rural idylls represent a spatial construct that reflects the values and aspirations of a society, but also its rifts, conflicts and changing attitudes regarding urban-rural relations. As such, their popularity can be seen both as a reaction to the rapidly changing social and economic conditions of urbanization and industrialization, and as a nostalgia for a perceived simpler and more authentic way of life. While rural idylls are often understood as a form of escapism, or a desire to retreat from the complexities and stresses of modern life, they are not unproblematic. By highlighting specific aspects and blocking out others, they form a highly selective visual and ideological regime of the rural, which directs our "rural gaze", as British geographer Simone Abrams calls it, towards the positive aspects of the countryside.

Against this backdrop, rural idylls become an important strategic tool of visual governance in political and economic contexts. Already early on, in the 1970s, Raymond Williams had pointed out hidden power relations between city and countryside that are embedded in popular media. Idylls can contribute to painting the countryside as anti-modern and to coding modernization as something negative. Accordingly, in order to address people who are skeptical of modernization, politicians use images of rural idylls, such as pictures of lush green fields and old-fashioned farms, to present themselves and their policies as being in tune with traditional values and ways of life. Yet, this strategy also serves to overshadow negative developments in rural areas, such as demographic shrinkage, unemployment, or lack of infrastructure.

At the same time, however, rural idylls also offer an imaginary that can create a development impulse for shrinking, peripheral regions. For example, they are often used to communicate a message of environmentalism by creating an emotional appeal to protect and preserve natural resources and rural landscapes. Also, it is this connection between "unspoilt nature" and the rural idyll, specifically, that is heavily employed by the food industry, for example in commercials that emphasize the authenticity and purity of a certain product while hiding its artificial and highly processed nature.

In any case, rural idylls are a key factor in the way we understand the countryside today. They are, as geographer Michael Woods wrote in 2011, "one of the most powerful and enduring ideas" in the way our societies perceive the rural landscape and rural communities. Rural idylls are not "good" or "bad" per se; however, as a powerful instrument of visual governance, we need to take them seriously. ■

Rural Racism in England

Racism in rural England is disregarded

Neil Chakraborti concisely defines "rural racism" as racism in a rural context. In 2020, Ellie Harrison – presenter of BBC Countryfile – spotlighted rural racism by labeling rural Britain as "racist". The response was polarized. G P Taylor, an author from rural Yorkshire, countered, "I have never come across any out and out racist behaviour…there is a great welcoming of everyone to the county – regardless of colour or religion." Yet Chakraborti corroborates Harrison and attests that most people of color who move from urban to rural Britain will experience racism.

Chloe Helen Bent is a mixed with British-Jamaican heritage, and was raised in rural Staffordshire (UK), where her family experienced both overt and covert racism.

Estimates for England in 2020 suggest that 17.1% (9.7 million) of the population resides in rural areas, which are defined as settlements with less than 10,000 inhabitants. 96.8% of the rural population is white, compared to only 81.7% of the urban population. Tom Fyans, Deputy CEO of countryside charity CPRE, acknowledges that many people of color in England are confronted by a rural "white middle-class club." And in the predominantly rural regions of West Mercia and Devon, Black people are stopped and searched more than white people at significantly higher rates: 14 times higher in West Mercia and 20 times higher in Devon.

Maxwell Ayamba, a British-Ghanaian journalist and academic, hosts countryside walking groups for people of color and notes that Black people are excluded from rural England. During one walk, a white passer-by took a photo of his group and exclaimed that she had never seen so many Black people in the countrysiide. Louisa Adjoa Parker, a writer of English-Ghanaian heritage, was subjected to racial abuse whist growing up in Devon – a rural region she describes as "whiter than white." She reflects: "…if our faces don't quite fit against the landscape, with its rolling hills and light and space, then perhaps it's time to rethink, and move into a future where they do."

Rural racism in England, however, is disregarded. In 2022, the UK government published a long-awaited report on race and ethnic disparities. The report makes no mention of rural racism, reasoning that people of color are more likely to reside in urban regions. Community-driven initiatives, rather, are at the forefront of tackling rural racism. Black2Nature, for instance, campaigns for equal access to the countryside on behalf of Visible Ethnic Minority (VEM) communities. And in 2021, CPRE undertook more than 100 hours of qualitative interviews with people of color to investigate rural inequalities. The resulting report placed these voices at front and center. ■

Rural Commons

What drives social and economic change? Who contributes to and who benefits from developmental processes? When it comes to questions like these, rural areas and local populations all over the globe have repeatedly found themselves excluded from or belittled in public and political debates. Considering some of the clichéd ways in which rural areas are perceived, this should come as no surprise: What is naturally harmonic and authentic, needs not or cannot change. On the other hand: What and who appears to be reluctant to progress does not need to be considered. But as the contributions to this magazine show, these stereotypical views are on the way to being overcome. Amid a global climate crisis and a multitude of debates on ecological, economic, and social sustainability, rural areas across the globe prove their transformative relevance. This is significantly due to local people initiating and leading communal projects, taking matters of designing rural futures into their own hands. Their commitment draws attention, demonstrating what cooperation on a local level makes possible and restoring as well as creating new images of ruralities. Rural Commons also show that, however specific the local context of people's initiative may be, they can serve as role model for participatory action anywhere. ■

The Zgoogoo

A rural social economy in northwestern Tunisia

Named by botanist Philip Miller in 1768, the Aleppo pine (Pinus halepensis) not only grows near Aleppo. It covers large surfaces around the Mediterranean, mainly in the Atlas Chain. Its sweet black seeds, locally called “zgoogoo”, are harvested almost only in Tunisia, specifically in the High Tell region. Discovered in the mid-19th century as a nutrient substitute for periods of severe starvation, it later served as an ingredient for a dessert eaten during the festivities of Mawlid (The Birth of The Prophet) and, more recently, as a yogurt flavour by Délice-Danone, before becoming an important source of income for the often jobless local population of mountainous, interior, rural Tunisia.

Hamza Ayari is a researcher in rural development of woody and mountainous lands.

The Aleppo pine forests severely degraded during the colonial period. Consequently, the Tunisian government adopted a policy of conservation and reforestation, cooperating with international environmental programs and employing the rural population to a great extent over a time of thirty years. When the plantations matured in the late 1980s, harvesting zgoogoo offered locals a way to increase their income and the Government started auctioning off parts of pine forests to control the increasing cultivation and harvest.

Aleppo Pine Forest

The local population organizes harvesting and marketing zgoogoo by self-sufficiency and solidarity. The experienced communities secure access to forests by pooling money and sending representatives to the auctions. Also, zgoogoo sale is mainly non-monopolistic: Often with no intermediaries, it is sold directly either to local buyers before Mawlid or to big agro-industry manufacturers. Overall, the zgoogoo chain is an example of economic, social, and ecological sustainability: In addition to supporting the local inhabitants’ livelihood and thereby discouraging rural exodus, it reduces the pressure on forest cover because the empty pine cones double as a substitute for wood. ■

(No) Piece of Cake

“Kaffeekränzchen” as agents of change

Imagine a room full of tables: Groups of four to five are sitting, chatting, drinking tea or coffee, enjoying delicious cakes. With the chatter, the noise level increases gradually: “Kaffeekränzchen,” an assemblage for sharing cake and coffee, can become an institution for a social-ecological transformation. It is based on a long known and often locally embedded rural practice of commoning. While the public demand for socializing and coffee can easily be commercialized in urban centers, it must be organized as a commons-based peer production in rural areas due to the unavailability or unprofitability of cafés.

Alina Gombert and Lukas Dörrie grew up on the countryside and founded the //KOMPOST ensemble for emancipatory ruralities. They use artistic methods to envision and produce rural futures.

Here’s a rundown of the event: A group of hosts organizes cake contributions, the venue, and work shifts. They invite participants and open the doors to multiple encounters. Kaffeekränzchen are free of transactional logics: contributing cake is not a necessary condition to enjoy plenty of it. The encounters during a Kaffeekränzchen can be intense. Once seated, you need to establish common ground with the person sitting next to you. Depending on how the participants’ group is curated, the event’s encounters bear a dual potential for change.

First, an open curation of participants confronts diverse realities, differently shaped by social patterns of (neo)colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. With all these realities part of a shared social escalation, the joint hedonistic act of consuming cake and coffee brings these patterns to the boil. They materialize in coffee, cake and participants, making them addressable and tangible. Experiencing such contradictions within the context of a Kränzchen performatively allows for the future to crack open. Second, an assemblage of participants with shared realities may produce resonance, a common feeling, and empowerment. Through the performance of Commoning, relationships are strengthened and visionary allyships are build. Both encounters are two sides of the same coin: a social-ecological transformation towards emancipatory ruralities. ■

“Kaffeekränzchen in Northern Hesse: Emancipatory ruralities require the deconstruction of hegemonies,”

Energy – Democracy?

How can we motivate people not only to accept the energy transition but also to drive it forward?

Hauke Feddersen grew up in an agriculturally shaped village in Schleswig-Holstein (Germany) and got to experience the transformation of it himself. As a sociologist, he reflects on how socio-ecological transformations could be understood as an opportunity and not as threat for rural areas.

Citizens' Wind Park of Bohmstedt

When looking at the media coverage of German energy transition, two conclusions are most likely to catch your eye. Firstly, the transition is progressing far too slowly to meet the Paris Agreement temperature goals. Secondly, there is too much resistance among the population in rural areas to implement said transition. If one was to follow this description, the problem primarily lies with the stubborn population wanting to preserve their beautiful landscape and thus slowing down the energy transition.

A different picture emerges, however, if we consider affected people not as obstacles but as potential drivers of the energy transition. In North Frisia, a rural area in the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, many municipalities have recognized that renewable energies do not only protect the climate but can also drive regional development. Here, wind farms were primarily set up by collectively owned wind companies in which all inhabitants of a village could participate. In my research, I was able to show how the annual income from business taxes on these farms has made it possible to maintain community facilities such as swimming pools or community centers. The regional economy, including the handicraft industry, benefited from this new source of income, too. But beyond these economic aspects, there are profound political effects leading to a positive assessment of the energy transition in North Frisia. The democratic and local character of these community-owned companies has led to even more projects being tackled as a community effort. New forms of self-efficacy were created through joint events at the local inn or in the decision to use communal funds to install fiberglass cables for a fast internet connection. In addition, within the (self-designed) landscape and community, a new sense of identity emerges. Through the active involvement and participation of the population, regional development and climate protection in North Frisia could be combined, bringing forth a self-sustaining dynamic for the energy transition. ■

Self-Empowerment

Sæd Ubjerg – a small village with many good forces

Karin Lorenzen Kjærgaard grew up in a small village in southern Jutland. After studying culture and economics and completing many development projects as a volunteer, she is now working as a rural development consultant in Tønder Municipality.

The village of Sæd is located in southern Jutland, only a few kilometers from the Danish-German border. It is small, counting just over 180 inhabitants, with no grocery store, no school and no kindergarten. Yet, it is a village full of life and optimism. This is mainly thanks to a group of local people that have set up an association dedicated to the village's development. They joined forces and arranged a large play area, a small playground, and a shared garage full of gardening tools and machines for everyone to use. Recently, they added three unique shelters that look like birdhouses, which are rented out to tourists. The association also raised funds to build a small but well-attended learning hut where students and adults alike can learn about renewable energy and climate change.

The story of Sæd is unique, and so is its backstory. In the debate around the construction of six new wind turbines, locals and officials were divided – but ultimately, the turbines were erected, with the village receiving around 1.9 million Danish kroner as compensation. The money has since been used for development projects throughout the village. Along this journey, the people of Saed developed strong social cohesion as well as a sense of agency and pride in living in a flourishing rural village. As another result of these developments, there are no longer any empty houses. Additionally, the citizens set up a company that bought and renovated a house where people can settle for up to 12 months and test whether or not living in the countryside might suit them. The innovative approach to attract new citizens seems to work: All of the three families that lived in the house have settled nearby.

Research shows that rural development requires the presence of human, social, and economic capital. You need the right people with a positive mindset, a sense of cohesion and agency, and, finally, the financial resources. It seems that it is precisely this cocktail that is being mixed perfectly in Sæd. ■

Join Hands

Protecting local amenities is a common task

What comes to mind when you hear that somebody has a village shop? Tranquility, rest, rural idyll? In many cases the reality can turn out to be very different: few customers, minimal order volume, too little purchasing power, and the continuous question of profitability. It's a tough task running a village shop, which is probably one of the key reasons as to why there are fewer shops in rural areas in general. But a village shop is more than a store: it serves as a meeting point, a center of information and communication, as a means of self-organization and direct marketing for regional goods, and very often it serves as a place of multiple supply. A village shop can be a "social meeting hub" (Kersten/Neu/Vogel 2022) and help create social interaction.

Miriam Alexandra Markowski grew up in a village north of Hamburg, where she now lives again. The daughter of a hairdresser's-shop owner, she does research on local amenities in rural areas.

With such diverse roles attributed to it, many locals and municipalities are faced with the challenge not only of establishing and running a village shop, but also of supporting its important multiple functions. For owners or even volunteers, it's often too difficult to manage on one's own. This calls for solutions involving a team of people. The government could support financially, for example. It also helps when big companies, organizations, or networks lay the foundations for

The MarktTreff-Team at the MarktTreff Barkauer Land in Kirchbarkau (district of Plön) with manager Dr. Dagmar Thiele-Gliesche (sign in hand)

successful business strategies by sharing their knowledge and contacts. Furthermore, volunteers can contribute local knowledge, innovation, and motivation. And then, of course, there are the owners. Their commercial knowledge, commitment and personality lay the groundwork to a shop. In short: The longevity of a village shop can be increased when the responsibility of running it is shared. Concepts of Community Development (cf. Elsen) can help in this way.

In my opinion, there is one other important point: Protecting local amenities helps to protect democracy, as it decreases feelings of abandonment or of having been "forgotten," which can lead people towards more extreme political routes. Let's join hands so that in the future, when we hear the term "village," we can still think of tranquility and rural idyll. ■

The Good Life, the Good Work

Why rural futures must be considered together with the future of work

Inga Reimers has returned to her home village and is conducting research at HafenCity University Hamburg on encounters and (collaborative) work in rural coworking spaces.

For almost everyone, usually after leaving school, the question arises of what line of paid work should be pursued and what this ultimately means for one's choice of residence. Even though digital infrastructures now make it easy to work from any location and mobile work has gained more acceptance following the Covid-19 pandemic, one is still confronted with the fundamental question of whether the local (rural) infrastructure facilitates the respective career. After all, choosing a career and a workplace is closely linked to choosing a spatial environment, be it rural or urban. All these aspects form part of what people define and communicate as "the good life" in rural areas.

Discussions on how "the good life" could become reality in rural areas have led to numerous coworking spaces being installed over the last decade in various German and European regions. Here, mostly self-employed knowledge workers pursue their own projects in shared office spaces. In urban areas, coworking spaces usually are a practical reaction to scarce and expensive office space. Rural coworking, however, is more about pooling knowledge and networking. In contrast to urban coworking, these countryside spaces sometimes originate from there being too much space to be repurposed.

In these transformation processes of rural space, the acting parties try to integrate the diverse local needs: They combine coworking with additional offers such as supermarkets and postal services or create community spaces for local initiatives. Those coworking spaces are referred to as "new village centers." In this respect, rural coworking spaces can be understood as important future-shaping places where notions of the rural and of New Work are discussed and implemented. This opens up possible ways to address problems like social division against the backdrop of multiple crises: What keeps us together, although or even because we do not agree in certain points and have different backgrounds? ■

A Gallic Village in Germany

Social innovations in rural communities

Influential narratives of rural life emphasize its backwardness, lack of innovation and resistance to change. As with every stereotype, this perspective appears one-sided and unjustified. If innovativeness is understood as the ability to develop novel solutions in response to challenges, people in rural places presumably innovate just as much as people in other areas. This was the initial assumption of the research on Social Innovations in Rural Communities, carried out by researchers at the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS). By means of ethnographic field work, they investigated rural communities across Europe, seeking to understand the conditions that enable and hinder innovative social action.

"I consider doing research on rural regions very important because it contributes to fighting socio-spatial disadvantages and to fostering alternative models of good life." Ralph Richter

Among the cases investigated, one initiative attracted the researchers' particular attention: a little village of about 130 inhabitants in the East of Germany. Residents physically implemented a local infrastructure project consisting of group wastewater treatment plants, a new pipeline network and a local heating system that used the wasted heat of a local bioenergy plant. In times of an all-encompassing service provision by public providers and private companies, this was an unexpected initiative. The implementation was further hindered by the initial resistance of the municipality. Like a gallic village, the community persisted in spite of external opposition and created their own infrastructures. The commitment of the residents – of which the photograph gives a good impression – were key to the initiative's success, along with the cost benefits obtained and the eventual support of higher authorities.

In interviews, we asked local people why they thought this initiative was innovative. In answering, they didn't highlight the technical solution, but rather the ability to mobilize the community and to carry out a project at their own request. The foundation of social innovations in general therefore lies in collective action that addresses social problems in a new way and contributes to social change in a community or society as a whole. We found that social innovations in rural communities benefit from the interplay of a strong community spirit, local leaders, and the ability to mobilize external support and resources. Good rural life is tied to regaining a degree of autonomy that, due to a long-lasting centralization policy, has often gotten lost over the last decades. ■

Power to the People

Community institutions could help India achieve its renewable energy goals

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Illustration 01: The women of the village gather to dig the trenches for pipes needed to install the solar energy system infrastructure.

Illustration 02: Members of the Pishu community help to install the solar energy system.

Illustration 03: Technical support agency Navikarana Trust design the piping systems to draw water to the village along with the solar energy committee of Pishu.

The world moves towards renewable energy sources and better infrastructure and development models. Currently, India relies heavily on coal for electricity generation, which poses significant challenges to energy access and contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution.

It is important for people in India to participate in the transition to clean energy because of concerns related to climate change, health benefits, and economic opportunities. However, the lack of community involvement, awareness among consumers, and access for them are major obstacles to implementing such measures. India's solar market is led by corporations, while in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, the transition is driven by citizen-led initiatives, with a high proportion of decentralized solar systems.

Geo Sebastian is an Indian rural development specialist who has experience with government projects in India on the state and federal levels. He has worked on projects regarding rural livelihoods, sanitation, financial inclusion ecosystems, and renewable energy solutions in remote regions of the Himalayas and West India.

By implementing a comprehensive, more sustainable and equitable energy system and community-based models that integrate energy efficiency as well as public awareness and access, India can transform its energy sector by 2030. The country's potential for harnessing alternative energy for large-scale commercial use is due to its geographical location: Radiation amounts to 3,000 hours of sunshine, representing over 5,000 trillion kWh. Yet, the country is still challenged by constant power shortages, especially in rural regions, caused by inefficient generation, transmission, and distribution that adversely affect the country's economic progress.

In India, accessing capital for citizen-led rooftop projects is challenging as most customers lack the necessary funds and banks are hesitant to provide loans. Self-help group (SHG) initiatives or Farmer Producer Companies can play a vital role in promoting decentralization and civic engagement. By supporting citizen-led energy business models through financial institutions, local ownership and responsibility can be fostered while simultaneously keeping local businesses active and promoting self-sustainability within communities. For example, establishing a cooperative legal entity allows members to access financing more easily, which in turn makes it easier for banks to support renewable energy initiatives. Measures like this facilitate the shift away from large-scale projects towards smaller, decentralized projects that offer small businesses an equal opportunity to participate in the solar market. Citizen involvement is critical to democratizing and making the energy transition sustainable. ■

Tourism at the Crossroads

An entire branch of the global tourism industry is based on the old commonplace of rural areas as ideal destinations of tranquility and harmony: Here, weary and anxious travelers – exhausted by the acceleration, fragmentation, and artificiality of the modern world – may at long last find peace and experience authentic, communal, and natural forms of uncompromised life. Using this imaginary as a unique selling point, rural areas are represented as simplistic and delightful spaces, free from any social or political irritation and free for consumption. While tourism can be seen as opening up opportunities for many regions of the world, this representation and consumption have effects on local cultural identities and nature. Rural areas and local populations often are faced with a dilemma: Their economies are sustained by, yet dependent on tourism, sometimes exclusively. And while their local identities gain visibility, this may come at the price of being severely reduced in their cultural complexity for the sake of marketing their "authenticity" as a product. Focusing on Greece, Georgia, and Denmark, the texts in this section pin down some of the points where rural areas may reach crossroads, presenting them with the challenge of balancing out their touristic and cultural futures. ■

Summer is *not just* a state of mind

The slow violence of the Greek tourism industry

There are always two sides to every coin. If economic growth is on the one side of the tourism industry, on the other we have land dispossession, biodiversity loss, commodification and labour precarity, among others. While the first side is obvious and hard to refute, the second is an explicit example of slow violence, a subtle yet profound case of a socioenvironmental conflict that is left largely unseen by mainstream culture and politics. A very prominent example of such a case are the socioenvironmental effects of the tourism industry in the Greek islands.

Katerina-Shelagh Boucoyannis is an architect and a researcher. Her research focuses on the interconnectedness of climate and social justice, design for autonomy and post-growth.

For centuries, island communities have thrived interrelated with nature, meticulously understanding the limits of their resources. This embodiment of autonomy and self-sufficiency is reflected in the social and ecological systems that are integral to the communities and detectable in their landscapes: cultivation terraces that make food production possible in barren lands and complex structures for water collection storage, outcomes of traditional systems of community work, are only a few prominent examples.

Yet, by the beginning of the 21st century, the western imaginary of Greece as the cradle of western civilization has changed into that of a grand and dispersed summer resort: a periphery of pleasure, casually interfered with by ancient ruins. Momentarily stagnant during the economic crisis, touristic growth has once again gained momentum over the past years. Spatial and strategic planning facilitated this growth, even where environmental protection laws could have prevented it. Due to the increasing tourism expansion, the socio-ecological systems that made these areas attractive in the first place are now rendered obsolete. What started as a source of income for the picturesque white villages of the Aegean is now a relentless yet gradual altering force, affecting societies and landscapes.

This shift in social metabolism goes a step beyond environmental consequences and the constant quest for sustainability. Socioecological structures that enable autonomy are an essential component of viable rural futures. As much as the imaginary of tourism needs to be redefined to corrects its ways, planning needs to adopt regenerative solutions that enhance autonomy and self-sufficiency, ensuring their well-being. ■

Lolland's (pending) legacy

The Fehmarnbelt Tunnel: Will it put Lolland on the map or make it another point of transit?

The southern island of Denmark, Lolland, stands before a big infrastructural change: The construction of the Fehmarnbelt tunnel, including a highway and railway, will connect the northern German island of Fehmarn with Rødbyhavn on Lolland. Currently, the local municipality and tourist organization use this project as a marketing tool to promote Lolland as an attractive tourist destination and, ultimately, a place to settle.

So far, Danish media have greatly helped in painting a negative picture of Lolland: It's the place you move away from, rather than move to. Hence, centrality is of great importance for local institutions as a way to positively change Lolland's narrative. The construction of the tunnel is widely supported by the inhabitants of Lolland up to the local government. This support rests upon the idea that what makes Lolland special is its commute time to larger cities. Reversely, without the Femern tunnel, Lolland would be viewed as being peripheral, which feeds into the problematic cultural understanding of rural areas as being far away from any other point of reference, meaning larger cities. Also, it is important to mention that the Fehmarnbelt tunnel is a European Union project. As such, its focus is more directed on shortening the commute between larger European cities, rather than improving the greater Lolland infrastructure and what is actually good for the region as a rural tourism and settlement destination.

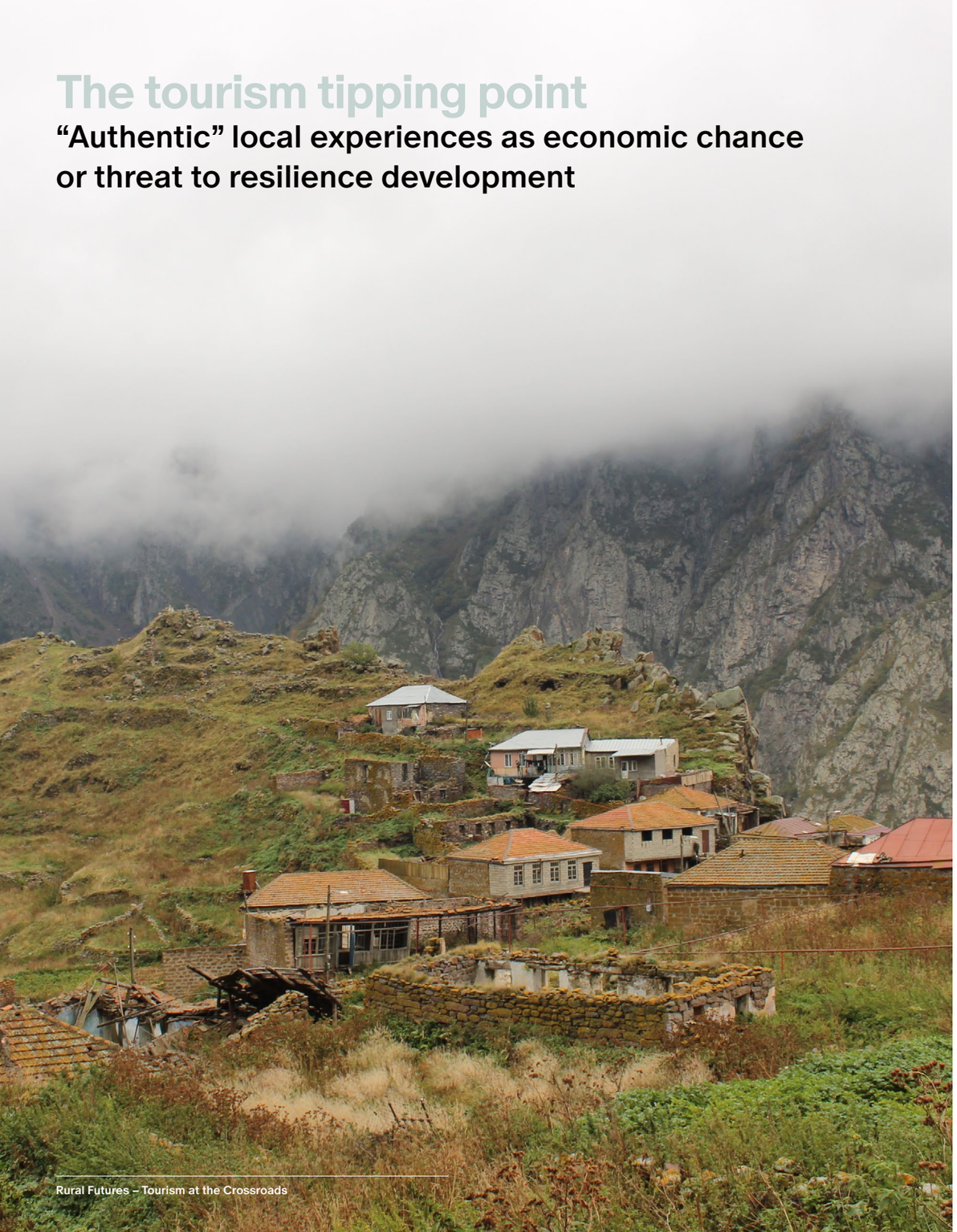
Dikte Grønvold was raised in a flat in the capital and Monica Andersen on a farm in the rural outskirts of Denmark. Both share a curiosity for islands and infrastructural development of rural tourism destinations. This includes critical perspectives on what said development actually means and who benefits from it.

In a destination development process, it is difficult to anticipate what will render a place unique in the eyes of its visitors, locals, media, and the public sphere. This is because an attachment to a place is based on intangible aspects such as personal meetings and atmosphere. These aspects, however, are difficult to plan for – unlike an infrastructural project.

In regard to the Fehmarnbelt project, it is unclear whether it is sufficient to encourage people to visit or to move to Lolland. Nevertheless, to the supporters of the tunnel, the project is also a symbol of Lolland taking agency of its own destination narrative and positive development. ■

The tourism tipping point

“Authentic” local experiences as economic chance or threat to resilience development



Tourism is one of the industries contributing to Georgia’s socioeconomic transition, with roots dating back to Soviet times. Thrown into disarray after regaining independence in 1991, several reforms have stimulated the tourism industry over the last 30 years. Amid the global trend of “touristization,” the number of international travelers rapidly increased in Georgia, too. Mountainous regions that lacked a diversity of income sources joined in tourism’s revival, resulting in a severe shift in the households’ economic profile.

Mountain families have converted their houses into family guesthouses, actively engaging in tourism services delivery. Firmly rooted in traditions, characteristics of local cultures are mirrored in visitor services. This is equivalent to commodifying traditional guest-host relationships, turning them into touristic services while trying to maintain their authenticity. This service, which makes their stay a unique experience, is very well received by tourists. This advantage of the mountainous destinations creates extra socioeconomic benefits (e.g., loyal visitors) which helps to preserve the long-standing cultural identity of the host community. At the same time, the growth of tourism can pose a threat to the resilience of local communities. Due to limited resources, some households have given up traditional agriculture in favor of tourism. This raises the question of whether tourism is a new beginning or the end of the economy for these communities: Will they be able to diversify their income, or will their livelihood become solely reliant on tourism?

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted tourism-dependent communities, forcing them to rethink the course of tourism development. Drawing from past experiences, local entrepreneurs should shift their focus to developing tourism-supportive industries, e.g., agriculture, manufacturing, transport, etc., with growth potential. Next, local businesses could expand beyond nearby regions and enter international markets while avoiding over-dependence on tourism. In summary, tourism development should be approached cautiously, seeking resilient solutions to prevent negative impacts on local communities. ■

Curious about the role that tourism progress plays in transforming places and traditional livelihoods, Gvantsa Salukvadze, a social scientist, studies socio-economic transitions in mountain regions as a result of global societal change.

Having moved from his home village to the Georgian capital with his family, Temur Gugushvili was inspired by his grandmother’s village stories to pursue rural studies at the Tbilisi State University, investigate rural transformations and telling his grandmother’s story.

With longstanding family roots in the eastern part of Georgia, where he often went for self-reflection and inspiration during the summers, Mikheil Kurdadze now works as a social scientist with a particular interest in the environmental and agricultural sector and as a fundraising and communications officer at the Regional Environmental Centre for the Caucasus (REC Caucasus).

“Rural Futures” Summer School

The interdisciplinary summer school on “Rural Futures” took place 19–23 September 2022 at the Akademiezentrum Sankelmark in the German-Danish border region. There, international scholars from various disciplines met with practitioners and activists. Together, the group set out to break with dominant discourses and to illuminate rural areas from within. We discussed new perspectives and approaches to the question of what “ruralities” are, and what they should become in the future.

Our starting point was the idea that all people used to live and work with local resources. However, as a result of globalization, local societies and economies have become detached from the land, increasingly segregated and marginalized. These developments have led to a drastic increase in the polarization of urban versus rural areas, clearly visible in political preferences in many countries. The summer school on “Rural Futures” sought to involve transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives on addressing these topics. It aimed to strengthen the network and cooperation among scholars, practitioners, and local actors in Germany, Denmark, and beyond. It included project presentations, short lectures, and guided tours, as well as exchange with local actors.

The summer school was organized by the German ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, the Centre of Rural Research of the University of Southern Denmark in Esbjerg, the Royal Danish Embassy in Berlin, the Europäische Akademie Schleswig-Holstein, and Europe Direct Südschleswig.

“Modern Provinces” Workshop

The interdisciplinary workshop “Modern Provinces,” which took place 12–13 May 2022, highlights the developmental dynamics of rural areas in Germany and Denmark. The focus was on Fehmarn, a region that combines old and new, metropolis and province, land and sea like hardly any other. It connects Germany and Denmark and the metropolitan regions of Hamburg and Copenhagen.

The workshop linked local and transnational perspectives on the different economic, social, cultural, and ecological structures of rural areas. The workshop’s aim was to facilitate networking and cooperation between theory and practice in Germany and Denmark – both in the province and beyond. The focus was on questions about the different developments in rural areas. What are the potentials of historical buildings and planned infrastructure projects? What challenges do rural areas face in their development? What is the significance of these areas in times of ecological transformation, e.g. with regard to sustainable tourism and land use? What are the connections, similarities, and differences between rural areas in Germany and Denmark?

The Workshop was organized by the German ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, the Royal Danish Embassy in Berlin, and Tourismus-Service Fehmarn.

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