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Summary of the meeting “Urban-Rural Partnership in the Baltic Sea Region”, 21. Sept. 2010 in Minsk

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One of the aims of the VASAB Long Term Perspective 2009 is overcoming the urban-rural divide in the Baltic Sea Region through enhanced co-operation and partnership. This is regarded as a major challenge. Also the European Union stresses the three c – concentration, connection and co-operation, and the Territorial Agenda of 2007 demands new forms of partnership and territorial governance between rural and urban areas. It is important that central documents stress this topic. Furthermore, the fifth cohesion report and the statement of the European commission stress the importance of functional regions – urban-rural partnerships are functional regions and take place therein.

Urban-rural partnerships are a comparatively new topic, although they are in discussion since the European Spatial Development Perspective of 1999 (ESDP). Nevertheless, there are only few examples for an implementation. But it has also be taken in account that similar projects under a different label have already come into being and exist. But this shows the necessity for a larger survey concerning the chances of this idea. Moreover, there may still be more open questions than satisfying answers concerning this topic. Some of them are:

- What is a partnership in this context?
- What is a necessary and reasonable spatial extent?
- How can the different connotations of “urban” and “rural” in the various countries and settings affect a common understanding?
- Do the towns have a specific responsibility for the adjacent rural areas?
- Which projects are suitable?
- Who could initiate and guide this process? Which planning levels have to be involved?

The goal of the workshop “Urban-Rural Partnership in the Baltic Sea Region” has been to exchange ideas about this measurement and to discuss the above named and other aspects. Furthermore, the goal was to find out whether urban-rural partnerships are an adequate contribution to spatial development. Thus, the following paper concentrates on the bullet points mentioned above, tries to give answers and/or reflects the state of discussion of the workshop.

What is a partnership in this context?

Perhaps the most difficult part in discussing the idea of urban-rural partnerships is the question about the nature of a partnership. This difficulty is also reflected in the varying and seemingly interchangeable use of the words partnership, interaction and cooperation – always with the prefix urban-rural. Indeed, there is no definition about the elements being constituent for a partnership. Nevertheless, there are two words which are important: On the one hand governance, as a certain form of an organisation makes at least the difference between a mere relationship and a partnership – although the relationship is the foundation of a partnership. On the other hand sustainability is important. Only a partnership can pave the way to a continuous exchange of ideas, a shared strategy and further projects.

The degree of institutionalization is open and has to be found by the participating regions and municipalities themselves according to their needs. This is also the basis for an exchange of ideas and their discussions about the goals and ways to achieve them. Furthermore, this platform gives all actors the possibility to participate in the process, to talk with and not only about each other as well as to create the feeling of belonging together.

However, the understanding of a partnership and the building of a partnership is a crucial topic, as it may be regarded less as a tool but rather as a problem in the whole process. Furthermore, these very different types of regions, i.e. urban and rural, central and peripheral as well as economically strong and weak one, have in many countries never co-operated before. A partnership does not imply that competition between the regions will cease. On the contrary, a partnership has to accept this competition. There will be always a certain threat to act against each other. Nevertheless, as e.g. every cluster initiative shows, co-operation and competition is possible at the same time.

What is a necessary and reasonable spatial extent?

Urban-rural partnerships do not focus on a pre-defined administrative spatial entities. But they have a kind of spatial background being suitable for them, i.e. the functional region. The size of this functional region depends on the readiness of actors to participate in this process, the regional needs to co-operate and the scope of the projects. The partnerships end where no more regions/municipalities bring in potentials to reach a goal as a dowry.

Anyhow, urban-rural partnerships go beyond suburbs. Thus, they have a certain minimal and a certain maximal spatial extent – which has to be defined by the regions themselves. But as urban-rural partnerships are flexible concepts, they offer the regions the possibility to decide on their individual scope depending on the regional setting.

There is a need to distinguish between a strategic and an operative level: The strategic level should take the whole functional region into account. The operative level may focus more on soft spaces in the sense of a variable geometry: Only those regions which have potentials to contribute to a goal can participate in a certain project or cooperation. But this idea demands that many projects or forms of cooperation with one partnership are carried out in parallel and incorporate as many actors from different municipalities as possible. This takes also into account that people live on different scales (local and regional and beyond).

The size of the partnership has to be defined by a bottom-up process coming from the regions themselves. A top-down approach is regarded as less promising, as the municipalities/regions have to participate deliberately in the partnership.

How can the different connotations of “urban” and “rural” in the various countries and settings affect a common understanding?

The Baltic Sea Region is – concerning its settlement structure – quite heterogeneous. The land cover ranges from cities like Hamburg with nearly 1.8 Mio inhabitants up to unpopulated areas. On the one hand, these differences prohibit a one-fits-all strategy. On the other hand, they provide the setting for mutual learning and examples with a broad variety. Furthermore, the question of what is urban and what is rural should not be in the middle of a discussion. But this also has the consequence that findings from one region are difficult to implement in another region.

This observation calls for a broad exchange of experience highlighting also the beneficial and hampering factors of a strategy and its single elements to promote successful urban-rural partnerships.

The specific settlement structure and the lack of major urban places imply that urban-rural partnerships are no area wide approach: The strategy is not suitable for every region.

Do the towns have a specific responsibility for the adjacent rural areas?

A basic question is why towns should take over a certain responsibility for rural areas – which of course the rural areas have to affirm. Towns are the nodal points in a country's settlement structure hosting many inhabitants, service functions, employments and having a high economic strength. This leads to an asymmetry and a shift of power between urban and rural areas.

But towns are not self-sufficient entities. Urban places depend on rural areas, too, as e.g. urban dwellers wish to have second homes outside the towns. Thus, local strategies should be embedded within a regional framework. This implies, too, that less the asymmetry and rather the complementary functions and potentials should come into the fore.

Rural areas, on the contrary, have to contribute to the partnerships with their potentials, too. They cannot regard the partnerships as a compensation for e.g. out-migration. On the contrary, only if they see the benefit of the whole region and their involvement to increase the quality of life, the partnership can work.

Which projects are suitable?

The work on the project level is a central element of urban-rural partnerships. Projects can serve as a platform to co-operate and to create trust among actors having perhaps never worked together before. Furthermore, the successful handling of a project brings motivation and is an important basis for a continuing co-operation. Therefore, the management of win-win-situations are initially important which help also to overcome a resistance against new approaches of some actors in the beginning. These pilot projects should come from the regions themselves in a bottom-up approach, as the regions know best the most appropriate spatial extent for the projects as well as the most suitable contents for the projects. Furthermore, successful projects can pave the way to come to a kind of governance and sustainability – which may also include a conflict management. Thus, urban-rural partnerships should be regarded as a learning process.

A high variety of projects are suitable for urban-rural partnerships – preconditioned that they fit into the specific regional setting. Some of them are rather classical approaches, e.g. clusters and networks, tourism concepts or marketing, but they have to be seen in the light of an approach being spatially much wider. Accessibility and transport play a key role, too, so that rural and more peripheral regions – including smaller towns within the partnership have a access to urban function. Furthermore, services and their provision to the whole partnership are an important topic, too. But also new chances, e.g. renewable energy supply or regional chains of value added, e.g. local and organic food, should be taken as an opportunity to form urban-rural partnerships.

The projects have to be based on potential within the partnership and on linkages already existing or being easily to establish. It is beneficial to manage not only one, but a variety of

projects to incorporate many actors with different backgrounds and to incorporate – in the sense of soft spaces – as many regions and municipalities as possible.

Who could initiate and guide this process? Which planning levels have to be involved?

Urban-rural partnerships can be successful when they start as a bottom-up process. Top-down approaches are less likely to fulfil the goals. Nevertheless, all political levels should take part in these partnerships, i.e. the local, the regional and the national (perhaps also a provincial one if existing). Thus, urban-rural partnerships are most likely well working in a multi-level-governance system. In this respect, towns can act as a mediator. As a general rule, their administrative capacity to manage these projects is bigger than in smaller communities. Furthermore, they can contact smaller communities easier than vice versa, additionally, they have an easier access to higher political levels than smaller municipalities.

Public authorities play a central role in this process, but a partnership should not remain on the administrative level. On the contrary, the participation of different actors – from the economy, sectoral politics, civil society etc. – is beneficial for a partnership. Especially spatial planning is asked to contribute in this respect – due to the interdisciplinary character of spatial planning and their experience in networking.

Motivated local and regional actors are a key factor. As urban-rural partnerships are a comparatively new tool for regional development, the motivation is essential to go this new way, to convince others to participate in this process and also to withstand failures.

Conclusion

Urban-rural partnerships are still an innovative experiment which can help to raise potentials and can lead to a new form of co-operation between different regions. They have to be regarded as a learning process and as a flexible and integrating tool. But this implies, too, that more knowledge is necessary about the ways and benefits of urban-rural partnerships. The Baltic Sea Region with its differences can contribute to this process. The Baltic Sea Region has already started, examples are COCO, the Finish Regional Cohesion and Competitiveness Programme, and MORO, the German demonstration project on supraregional partnerships. New Bridges is a further example, also Urban coming from the North Sea Region Programme can provide much experience.

The main goal for many regional development measures is to raise the economic attractiveness of regions and to increase the quality of life. Urban-rural partnerships can be a way among others to achieve this goal, it is a supplementary strategy. The basic idea is to bring together different types of regions in a larger spatial extent to regard themselves – despite all differences – as a regional entity. But the expectations concerning urban-rural partnerships should be adequate. They can contribute to spatial development, but they will not solve all problems like demographic changes. They can contribute to break vicious cycles like out-migration – less services – less quality of life – further out migration by securing potentials. But they cannot promise to do so. Furthermore, it is not appropriate to implement urban-rural partnerships where the preconditions do not exist – preconditions concerning the will to do so, concerning motivated actors, concerning the settlement structure etc.

Further research on urban-rural partnerships and further implementation of this idea will lead to more knowledge about this way and also to more acceptances. Parallely, they can support

the idea of the European Union concerning social, economic and territorial cohesion on a regional scale.

Recommendations

1. The implementation of urban-rural partnerships should be enforced to get increased knowledge about this strategy in regional planning.
2. There is a need for further research on urban-rural partnerships to find out promoting and hampering factors.
3. There is a need for openness on every regional level for this idea in order to create real multi-level governance processes.
4. Exchange of experience based on demonstration projects on urban-rural partnerships should be encouraged in all countries and on transnational level.
5. The EU could further promote the idea of urban-rural partnerships through its structural fund programmes.