

# Summary

## NEW PROSPECTS FOR PERIPHERAL RURAL REGIONS

### Task

The Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) deals, among other things, with the diverse issues relating to rural development within the scope of the implementation of the Austrian Spatial Development Concept 2001. This publication presents the findings of the ÖROK project "Peripheral Rural Regions". This project with a focus on communication served as a discussion platform on development opportunities in rural areas. As a starting point for the discussion, the status of theoretical knowledge was analysed, and in the further course of the project, hypotheses – and ultimately – recommendations for action were formulated. Furthermore, examples from practice that show some interesting approaches to the problems of rural regions were prepared and presented in the collection of materials. Three workshops were organized within the scope of the project – one of them in Murau, which is a small town located in the western periphery of the Land of Styria. The project aimed to enable a discussion on a broad basis that was also open to minority views, and to discuss the myths and taboos in rural development. Apart from the research work conducted, interviews of persons from business, culture and politics with personal or professional relationships to rural regions were conducted to achieve this goal.

### Rural regions between exodus and dynamic

Rural development is a many-sided regional concept. The different political programmes in Austria and at the EU level are all committed to promoting autonomous, diverse and prosperous rural areas and aim to enable the exploitation of the potentials of rural areas.

The OECD typology of rural areas is often used to define and demarcate areas. It defines rural regions according to the criteria of population density and differentiates between "predominantly rural regions", "significantly rural regions" and "predominantly urban regions". Other methods of classification such as the one used in this study take several criteria into account for the definition of types of regions.

Regional development trends can be explained based on different indicators. The long-term comparison of residential and working populations in Austria shows

a long-term sustained trend of diminishing population along the former "Iron Curtain" borders as well as in the peripheral inner alpine regions. The in-migration gains are reported mainly by the catchment areas of cities. A much wider area is affected by negative employment trends than by shrinking population figures; this means that large parts of rural areas fulfil mainly the function of residential area. The West-East disparity that existed in the economic output of Austria's regions for a long time has diminished since the fall of the Iron Curtain and EU Structural Funds. The low degree of female employment in most rural areas shows that the economic potential of the regions is not being fully exploited.

The population forecasts of Statistik Austria show a general trend in society of an aging population in the coming decades. The concentration of the population in larger cities and their surroundings, and the "exodus" from some peripheral rural regions may be expected.

Within the scope of another ÖROK project, four scenarios of regional development in Austria in 2030 were developed based on several economic, social and political factors of influence. All of these scenarios have one thing in common: economic growth emanates from the agglomerations, with future developments in rural regions evolving along very different lines depending on the interaction of the various trends and political strategies.

The following factors of influence on the development of rural regions are viewed as essential in expert literature:

- Economic structure and organisation
- Natural resources and quality of the environment
- Accessibility and infrastructure, access to high-capacity ICT technologies
- Cultural values, social trends and human capital
- Institutional developments and political environment

### Countryside is not countryside

No such thing as "the rural region" exists. Rural regions differ widely with respect to their development paths and perspectives, and therefore, the actions they call for also vary.

### Rural areas in urbanized regions

These are located in the urban catchment areas with close relations to other neighbouring cities as well as in polycentric areas in the surrounding areas of transport routes. These regions exhibit a fast dynamic of development and must cope with the many-sided challenges involved in orderly spatial development. An example for this type of region is Rheintal in Vorarlberg where a comprehensive scheme for rural development and regional cooperation was developed ("Vision Rheintal").

### Rural regions characterized by intense tourism

These regions are mainly in the western parts of Austria's alpine region; they are also characterized by a fast dynamic, but also by structural dependence on tourism. Ecological sensitivity heightens the need for steering spatial development. This type of region is characterised, for example, by the NUTS 3 region Pinzgau – Pongau. In this case, there is a strong focus on tourism as the driver of economic development; the region with its varied range of offerings will probably have to compete with other destinations in the future as well.

### Peripheral rural areas

These areas are located mainly in the southern and eastern parts of Austria's alpine regions and along the former borders to the Eastern block. They are characterised by low economic productivity and shrinking population figures. The objective is to find a way out of this "negative spiral". The district of Murau in western Upper Styria is an example for a peripherally-located inner alpine region; the southern part of Burgenland is an example for a region on the former border to the Eastern block that has profited from Objective 1 funding. The two regions rely heavily on their natural resources and cultural landscape. While Murau has positioned itself as a timber region ("Holzwelt", timber world), the region of southern Burgenland thrives on the impulses from health spa tourism.

### Focus: Current themes relating to the development of peripheral rural regions

In the course of the project, the following three principal thematic strands were identified:

#### Social scope of action – Exploiting social diversity

It is not only economic efficiency and employment opportunities that determine the appeal of peripheral rural areas, but rather also the social structures. The population in rural regions is not homogenous,

but differs with respect to age, gender, origin and levels of knowledge. However, this diversity does not find expression in the political and decision-making bodies of regional development organizations, and only rarely are all social groups specifically included in the development processes. Equal opportunity of men and women, the relationship between the generations, and integration of immigrants have not been given sufficient attention in rural development policy considerations up to now.

The social scope available in a region is defined by the extent to which the different actors and groups are able to develop their creativity, interests, and talents and contribute these to the development of their region. Narrowness of social space is a factor that contributes – apart from "hard" factors such as available jobs – to out-migration and "brain drain".

A task for regional development that has tended to be disregarded up to now is starting to emerge: The goal of specifically making efforts to enlarge social spaces and make better use of such spaces. The activation of existing creative and innovative potential could very well contribute crucial impulses for local and regional development. In rural regions, projects to better integrate migrants or to improve the compatibility of job and family can contribute, for example, to improving the quality of life. To enlarge social space, it is necessary to strengthen the presence of women in public political functions and encourage dialogue with critical and creative persons. For example, people who have left the regions often have relevant know-how for regional development.

The development of social space in rural regions requires changes to existing regional policy instruments and more support for implementing the relevant projects. In the future, development programmes should offer more concrete points of contact for enlarging social diversity. The implementation of small-scale pilot projects to improve the use of diverse creative potentials should be supported financially.

#### Inter-communal cooperation

Considering the increasing demands on municipalities, it is necessary to deepen collaboration among the municipalities. Only if the regional actors in peripheral rural areas bundle their strengths will they be able to enlarge their scope of action, create development impulses and better exploit existing opportunities. Therefore, regional development and planning will rely increasingly on taking advantage of cooperation potentials.

In the past years, numerous initiatives were started in Austria to promote collaboration among municipali-

ties. In spatial planning policy, several Länder promoted the formation or strengthening of small regional structures. Many rural municipalities took part in the cooperation projects of the LEADER programme. Therefore, a lot of experience has been gained with the different types of inter-communal cooperation, e.g. the joint provision of public services, operation of infrastructure, the preparation of rural development schemes and the establishment of enterprises. The inter-communal cooperation has various forms of organization and takes place within various types of cooperative structures with varying degrees of commitment.

In peripheral rural areas, business activities and the population are increasingly concentrating in regional centres such as in the district capitals. These are important for regional economic development as centres of employment and education, as supply centres and as places for physical encounters. The de-centralized concentration in regional centres is accompanied by the disappearance of basic services from the smaller municipalities in the peripheral regions. The small centres need specific development impulses that build on existing strengths. Out-migration and depopulation are threatening the smaller rural municipalities and there it is especially important to support any self-organized efforts to secure communal services. To achieve the positive overall development of peripheral rural areas, cooperation between the regional centres and the rural surroundings needs to be deepened.

The municipalities of a region often compete with each other to attract enterprises to locate there. However, if development impulses are created at the best-suited locations and the costs and returns are distributed among the involved municipalities, then the locations can be marketed much easier. Furthermore, this would be more in line with the requirements of spatial planning. This experience has been gained in several projects in the area of inter-communal enterprise location. Cooperative modes of procedure should be enlarged even further in the future.

The positive effects of cooperation projects are often restricted by lacking cooperation structures; cooperation processes are not always managed professionally. Furthermore, the persons on political bodies in smaller municipalities do this as additional activity in addition to their regular work and have limited time resources. Under such conditions, time-consuming cooperation projects exceed available capacities. In many cooperation projects, attention is not paid specifically to the equal treatment of women; women are underrepresented, especially in decision-making bodies.

## **Land uses and changes to cultural landscapes – Area-wide agricultural cultivation or new wilderness areas**

Many peripheral rural regions are characterized by adverse production conditions for forestry and agriculture and by limited options for other industries, but have attractive cultural landscapes that represent a specific potential for tourism uses.

Regional development schemes often aim to preserve existing landscapes. This includes the desire to secure the agricultural land use also in areas with unfavourable production structures. In fact, the desired landscape patterns have already changed in many areas. In many mountain areas, the successive enlargement of forested areas has been observed, and in some cases, there are areas with a high share of fallow land. It would seem to make sense to develop new outlooks and alternative uses before the exodus process become worse.

A differentiated view of land use intensity is important especially for peripheral, mostly thinly populated areas. Spaces in which near-natural landscapes and possibly also areas with "wilderness" tendencies have a place are unique. Compared to the dense, concentrated use of space, areas with "high environmental quality" are especially appealing. Diverse landscapes are sought out by visitors often as a special attraction. Above all, change and diversity in cultivation forms are viewed as particularly attractive landscapes.

An intensive discussion of the issues regarding the development of land uses is of enormous importance for both agricultural and regional policy.

## **Recommendations for action**

Recommendations for action show three areas of activity from which a significant influence on the development of rural regions may be expected:

### **1. Transform political objectives in the area of "social diversity" into operational measures**

Budgets should include specific funds for the promotion of social diversity. The subject of social diversity should be established firmly in the structures of regional development organizations and regular evaluation procedures should be set up.

### **2. Establish social diversity pilot projects and enlarge specific educational measures**

The topics of social diversity such as equal opportunity and integration should become the objects of specific educational measures, regional development programmes and pilot projects.

### **3. Secure the structures for the deepening of inter-communal cooperation**

Cooperation structures for municipalities should be enlarged or if necessary newly created as a condition for the strengthening and further expansion of inter-communal cooperation, e.g. for joint development projects, administrative cooperation or common enterprise locations.

### **4. Enlarge cooperation competences and reinforce the culture of cooperation**

To improve the cooperation culture, the professional management of cooperation processes should be encouraged. The cooperation competences of the municipalities should be reinforced by educational opportunities. Participative cooperation models should be anchored in guidelines.

### **5. Exploit environmental quality as a potential in peripheral regions**

Strategies to secure multi-functional land uses in peripheral areas should be developed at the regional level. These strategies should highlight the specific potentials of a high environmental quality in these areas and transform the issue of shaping landscape development into a regional policy task.

### **6. Achieve landscape diversity through differentiated land use**

Peripheral regions should be more involved in the discussions of differentiated land use. These range

from a high degree of cultivation to a clear retreat from area-wide cultivation. In sparsely used areas, the definition of different categories of protected areas is of special significance. The definitions and their further development should be carried out with the intense involvement of the regions.

## **Materials collection**

The materials collection presents an overview of a variety of good practice projects that contain possible solutions to the problems of rural areas. Especially in the case of peripheral areas with weak structures threatened by the "downwards spiral" of out-migration and economic weakness, the projects presented open up new perspectives for action: Strengthening social diversity and inter-communal cooperation can create important impulses for positive regional development. The retreat of area-wide farming observed in many places could be viewed as an incentive to develop attractive near-natural landscapes. The report discusses six projects in detail that feature innovative approaches and have already been implemented successfully. Further 61 projects are described in the Annex. Most examples from practice refer to rural areas in Austria with a few contributions from other countries (Italy, Switzerland, Germany, US) completing the collection.