



Resituating the Local in Cohesion and Territorial Development



**Figure 1:** A village in Ostwestfalen-Lippe (Source: ILS)

**Case Study Report**  
**Smart Country Side Ostwestfalen-Lippe**  
**Digitalisation as a Tool to Promote Civic Engagement in Rural Villages,**  
**Germany**

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## Abbreviations

EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development
EFRD	European Fund for Regional Development
eng.	English
ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
e.V.	Registered Association
ger.	German
GmbH	Private Limited Company (Ltd.)
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale (eng., Links between actions for the development of the rural economy)
IKEK	Integrated Municipal Development Concept (ger., Integriertes Kommunales Entwicklungskonzept)
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
OWL	Ostwestfalen-Lippe
SCS	Smart Country Side
SMEs	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

## Abbreviations for interview quotes and references

OWL Number	Interview belongs to the Ostwestfalen-Lippe case study Number of the interview partner (see also Annex 8.1)
Civ Pub Med	Civil actor Public actor (including political actors and the municipal administration) Member of the media
V L R	Village: Actor's main activities are below the district level, on a village level Local: Actor's main activities are on the local district level Regional: Actor's main activities are beyond the local district level,
I E	Internal to the action under study External to the action under study
FG Number	Focus Group Number of the focus group (see also Annex 8.1)

Example: OWL1 PubLI = Interview partner number 1 in the case study Ostwestfalen-Lippe is a public actor on the local level, who is internal to the action

All quotes in this report have been translated from German to English by the authors. Authors' notes are given in square brackets.

# Executive Summary

## Background

The case study report discusses the *Smart Country Side (SCS)* project, which takes place in rural villages in the two administrative districts Höxter and Lippe in Ostwestfalen-Lippe in north-eastern North Rhine-Westphalia. The project is part of a regional action programme which fosters digital transformation processes in Ostwestfalen-Lippe. In contrast to the other sub-projects of the programme, *SCS* focuses on rural areas and is citizen-oriented. By offering new digital ways for civic engagement and digital solutions for the villages' problems, the project tries to tackle issues of spatial injustice coming along with living in rural areas. In detail, 16 localities, of which four have been studied in depth for this case study, have been selected in both districts to create their own digital solutions. The different applications are merged in and provided by a digital village platform, which villagers are able to use after project implementation. Over the course of the project, participating villages have furthermore been equipped with multimedia infrastructure and volunteers could take part in digital training courses.

## Findings

The *SCS* project has initiated, coordinated, and supported local villages in the process of identifying and implementing digital solutions to enhance social cohesion and quality of life. While *SCS* experienced challenges during the project's lifetime (for example with delayed implementation of the village platform or lacking broadband capacities), we argue that the action has proven successful. Positive effects of the action are related to the process-related characteristics of the project, such as flexibility of the project set-up, the clear orientation on local village needs and the deployment of local capital in form of civic engagement. We see a direct link between the way how the project was set-up and organised (in terms of a place-based and community-oriented approach) and the local acceptance and willingness of villagers to invest time and resources in the project. The specific topic of digitalisation furthered the project's uptake in the villages, as due to the cross-sectional character of the topic it was compatible with all sorts of already existing local initiatives. Distributive spatial justice issues have been less to the fore in the *SCS* project. Nevertheless, training courses and IT media centres have contributed to capacity building and infrastructure in the villages.

## Outlook

The biggest policy changes ahead are to move beyond the stage of a model project, learn from *SCS* experiences and use this knowledge to mainstream practices which have proven to be successful. Through its place-based and community-oriented development approach, *Smart Country Side* raised a considerable amount of local social capital which could not have been raised by conventional administrative development projects and procedures. This backs arguments for a general shift of responsibilities to the local level. Nevertheless, such local commitment has to be coordinated to some extent by an overhead structure beyond the lifetime of the *SCS* project. While the project aims at transferring its effects and outcomes to other non-participating localities in both administrative districts, this objective cannot be achieved to full extent. Apart from every village having its own unique character, it is obvious that there are villages which would not be able to reach a similar level of voluntary commitment. A complementary strategy is thus needed for digital inclusion of these villages in order to prevent intra-regional competition and create new or widen existing inequalities, hence leading to less distributive justice in the region.

## 1. Introduction

The case study focuses on the state- and EU-funded participative action *Smart Country Side*, taking place in rural villages in the two administrative districts Höxter and Lippe. Aim of the project is to use the potential of digital innovations and solutions for improving living conditions in rural areas through a participative bottom-up approach.

Living in rural areas comes along with specific accessibility disadvantages compared to urban areas, for example lacking or insufficient broadband supply, public transport, and child care. However, the project under research does not intend to tackle issues of hard infrastructure in terms of the aforementioned examples. *SCS* concentrates on communication processes and social challenges which potentially could be solved digitally, in form of digital platforms like a church app. Thereby, the action recognises the importance of soft factors for the attractiveness of a region.

While approaching these issues through participative methods (e.g. village conferences were conducted and local volunteers have been qualified to become ‘digital village experts’), particularly procedural spatial justice is a key factor of the action. Distributive spatial justice issues have been less to the fore. Nevertheless, training courses and IT media centres have contributed to capacity building and infrastructure in the villages.

*SCS* is one of ten projects of an integrated regional action programme called *OWL 4.0*, created by the development agency (*OWL GmbH*) of Ostwestfalen-Lippe, which is the region the districts of Höxter and Lippe are located in. Interestingly, the project coordinators are employed by the communal business development agencies. It is quite unusual for such corporations to foster participative citizen-oriented projects. Typically, other administrative institutions are responsible for such tasks. The other projects of the regional programme promote rather business-oriented ventures or urban renewal actions.

The administrative districts of Höxter and Lippe are located in an economically rather prosperous region. Medium-sized (often family-run) companies in the manufacturing sector offer good job and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the region is affected by demographic change and outmigration of mainly younger people. The most disadvantaged population groups are the elderly and the immobile. Still, challenges differ in intensity among the villages. The project tries to tackle these issues with a participative approach in which local specificities are taken into account and volunteers are trained to impart their knowledge to others. Moreover, the project aims to get in touch with younger people to attract this group to come respectively to stay in the region. This group is usually familiar with digitalisation, but their demands are often not mirrored in the voluntary engagement structures of the villages yet.

*SCS* can be seen as part of national and federal state strategies to ensure equal living conditions in urban and rural areas (cf. Die Bundesregierung, 2018). Strong re-urbanization processes and a continuously high attractiveness of German metropolitan regions as places to study and work, specifically for a younger population, tend to widen the rural-urban gap in Germany (Henger & Oberst, 2019). Therefore, improving the attractiveness of and living conditions in rural areas facing outmigration is high on the political agenda (Ibid.) and the project could acquire additional funding by national and federal state programmes. It needs to be stated that at the time of writing this report (March 2019), *SCS* is in its final phase of implementation. The report thus provides insights without being able to evaluate the final outcomes of the project.



## 2. Methodological Reflection

*Smart Country Side* project coordinators were very interested in the research, wherefrom a close collaboration resulted. Access was granted to formal interviews, public talks, and non-public meetings. For instance, researchers participated in a meeting of the political advisory board and two village conferences. Altogether, 24 formal interviews were conducted with a total of 36 interview partners. Additionally, a focus group was organised to reflect and discuss questions that emerged from research results. Focus groups participants were the project coordinators of the two administrative districts and a member of another research institute, contracted by *SCS* to evaluate the project's outcomes. Empirical findings are based on interviews, focus groups, informal talks, and observations of local village conferences.

**Access to stakeholders** of the action proceeded through the project coordinators in both districts. Furthermore, the choice of the villages studied in-depth was discussed with *SCS* coordinators. In almost all cases the project coordinators contacted the interview partners and helped scheduling interview appointments. The close connection to the project team and their support in setting up interviews helped us to get access to both village and higher-level stakeholders, who might otherwise have been reluctant or too busy to participate in interviews. However, interviewees might have perceived researchers as being 'attached' to the project instead of acting independently. For example, some interviewees thought that researchers were in charge of the project-internal evaluation process. Although researchers paid attention to clarifying their role, this 'attachment' might still have had an impact on the interviewees. Researchers are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the approach and aimed to reflect on them throughout the research process. Eventually, it is important to keep these issues and their methodological implications in mind when reading the case study.

An additional and interesting perspective on the project would have been to talk to stakeholders of villages which dropped out during the selection process or have not been selected at all (see Chapter 4.1). Yet, due to restrictions in time there has not been any **contact to non-participating villages**.

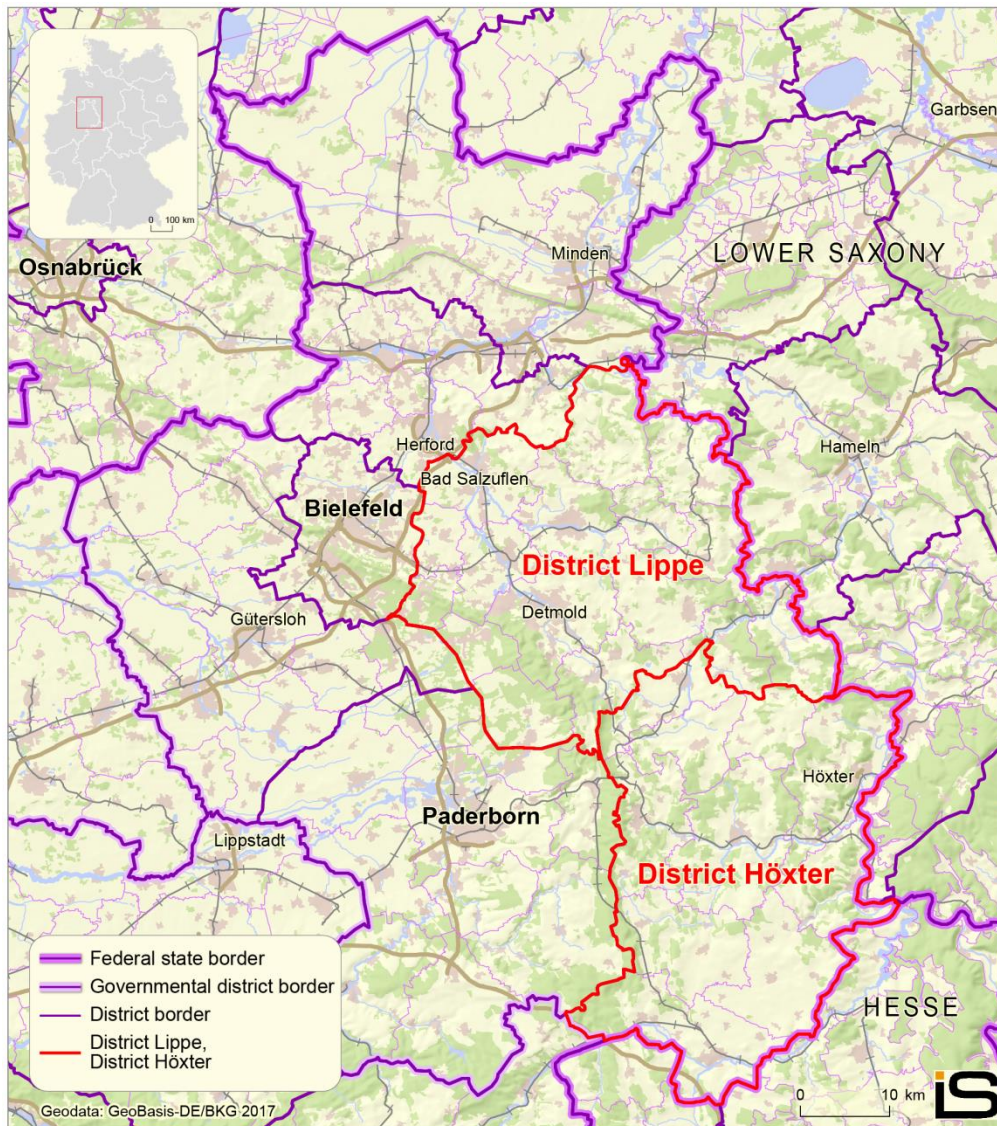
Lastly, as it often happens in research in small communities, we came upon the same interview partners in different contexts. Thus, one person amongst the interviewees fulfils a **double role** as both public expert and civil volunteer and was interviewed twice. We scheduled separate interviews in different locations to grasp the different perspectives the person has on the action. However, it was of course still the same person, expressing the same opinions in both interviews regarding certain interview topics. Consequently, over the course of analysis, we paid attention not to overstate the person's view on specific issues in relation to other respondents.



### 3. The Localities Höxter and Lippe– Economic Prosperity in an Ageing Region

#### 3.1 Territorial Context and Characteristics of the districts Höxter and Lippe

The action *Smart Country Side* takes place in the administrative districts Höxter and Lippe in the state North Rhine-Westphalia. The districts are located in the Eastern part of the state, bordering the states of Lower Saxony and Hesse. Together they form part of the region Ostwestfalen-Lippe, which is congruent with the governmental district Detmold (see Map 1).



**Map 1:** The districts of Höxter and Lippe in Ostwestfalen-Lippe respectively the governmental district Detmold (Source: ILS)

The region features a strong regional branding not common to governmental districts in Germany. According to a nation-wide survey in 2017, 82% of the respondents<sup>1</sup> have heard at least once of 'OstWestfalenLippe' (OWL GmbH, 2018, p. 5). In particular, a diversity of industrial sectors and a pleasant landscape are associated with the region (Ibid.).

Economically, the region is shaped by furniture production, electrical engineering, and the machine construction sector (NRW.BANK, 2018, p. 3). Moreover, there is a widespread net of SME, many of them 'hidden champions' in the supply of specialised products (OWL2 PubLI, OWL3 PubLE). A majority of them are traditional family businesses (NRW.BANK, 2018, p. 3). They feel as "*part of the region*" (OWL7 PubRE) and thus show high engagement for regional networks and the maintenance of jobs and services in the locality. All in all, the orientation of regional businesses towards modern economic trends in the engineering industry has fostered strong economic growth and prosperity over the past decades (Henrich, 2015; cf. NRW.BANK, 2018).

The foundation of a regional marketing company in 1993 (which also commissioned the abovementioned survey) can be seen as an essential promoter of this cooperation of businesses and communities (Henrich, 2015). In 2012, the company advanced into a regional development agency and since then carries the name *OstWestfalenLippe GmbH* (hereafter *OWL GmbH*). The activities of the *OWL GmbH* mainly involve the integration of the region in the fields of industry, labour market, innovation and research, culture, and tourism. Amongst others it has founded the cluster of excellence '*it's OWL*', a network of businesses aimed at developing intelligent technological systems.

Reasons for choosing the districts Lippe and Höxter over others for the SCS project are based on the one hand on their rural characteristics. Both districts have a relatively low population density (see Table 1) compared to the average of the region (315 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>; IT.NRW, 2016, p. 2). Additionally, the active lobbying and engagement of the responsible persons in the local district administrations was of importance for the spatial selection of the action (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI).

Prosperity of the region does have a knock-on effect for the rural areas in Lippe and Höxter in terms of image and labour market. Many inhabitants of small villages work in larger towns and cities, leading to high numbers of commuters. Next to the district Herford, Höxter (35 %) and Lippe (38 %) have the highest numbers of employees commuting outside the district borders in Ostwestfalen-Lippe (Arbeitsagentur, 2018). Particularly Lippe is located in short distance to Bielefeld, the largest city of the region, where most employees are commuting to (Ibid.), and the highway A2, an important regional development axis (OWL8 PubLE). The district Höxter, in contrast, is much more remote from urban agglomerations and its largest town, the district capital Höxter, has around 30,000 inhabitants.

In terms of unemployment, the districts perform much better than the German (5.3 %) and North Rhine-Westphalian average (6.6 %). Höxter's unemployment rate of 4.0% is the fourth lowest on state level (Arbeitsagentur, 2019; NRW.BANK, 2018, p. 28). Nevertheless, as measured by GDP, both Höxter (26,719 €/inhabitant) and Lippe (29,139 €/inhabitant) are economically less prosperous than their surrounding districts: the GDP of Ostwestfalen-Lippe lies at 36,524€ per inhabitant, the North Rhine-Westphalian average is about 37,416 €/inhabitant (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents have been 502 decision-makers from economics, science, politics, administrations and other sectors of public life (OWL GmbH, 2018).

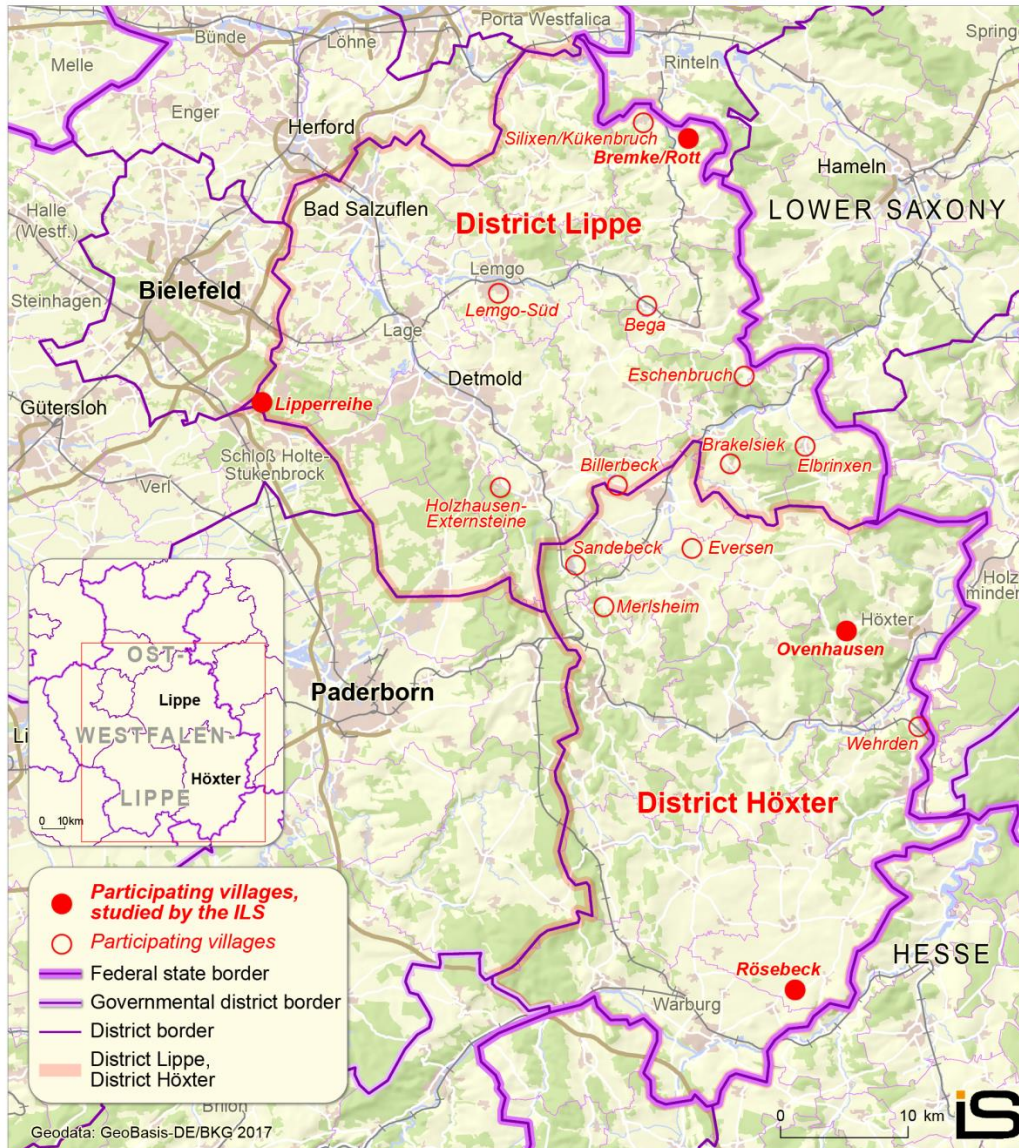
Regarding their population, both districts expect an above-average decrease in population over the next years (NRW.BANK, 2018, p. 14; see Annex 8.3). Especially small villages in rural areas are suffering from outmigration. Interviewees explained that this is mainly due to a lack of infrastructure, rendering the region less attractive for young people and families (OWL16 CivLE, OWL18 CivVI). Thus, the villages selected for SCS are all – although to varying degrees – experiencing demographic change, ageing, and difficulties concerning service provision.

Name of Case Study Area	Districts of Lippe and Höxter within the region Ostwestfalen-Lippe and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia
Size	Lippe: 1,246 km <sup>2</sup> Höxter: 1,201 km <sup>2</sup>
Total population (2016)	Lippe: 350,750 Höxter: 144,010
Population density (2016)	Lippe: 281.2 inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup> Höxter: 119.1 inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup>
Level of development in relation to wider socioeconomic context	Disadvantaged region in the national context regarding demographic factors (economic disadvantage not applicable)
Type of the region (NUTS3-Eurostat)	Predominantly Rural
Name and Identification Code of the NUTS-3 area, in which the locality is situated (NUTS 3 Code as of 2013)	DEA45 Lippe DEA44 Höxter
Name and Identification Code of the NUTS-2 area, in which the locality is situated (NUTS 2 Code(s) as of 2013)	DEA4 Detmold

**Table 1:** Basic spatial and socio-economic characteristics of the districts Höxter and Lippe (Source: Eurostat)

In the district Lippe, 10 villages have been selected to participate in the project, while in Höxter, 6 villages have been chosen as result of a tendering procedure (see Map 2). The villages are located in different areas of the two districts, some closer to regional centres, some at the borders to neighbouring states, others in mountainous areas. Their population sizes range from 315 (Merlsheim) to 6,294 (Lemgo-Süd) inhabitants.





**Map 2:** Participating villages of *Smart Country Side* (Source: ILS)

In order to understand the various characteristics and challenges the different villages face, four villages have been chosen for closer evaluation in this case study. Our choice was based on the interest to have a diverse set of examples and followed a thorough discussion with the project team of SCS. Naturally, the study of four out of 16 villages does not provide the full range of experiences with the project, yet we are confident to have grasped a detailed and balanced participants' perspective.

In Höxter, the chosen villages are Rösebeck and Ovenhausen. The former has 475 inhabitants and is located few kilometres from the border to Hesse. The inhabitants are engaged in 12 associations, from voluntary firefighters to religious community groups. The central meeting point of the town is the 'Bördeblickhalle', which has been taken over by a voluntary association from the municipality as a consequence of the desolate financial situation of the latter (Betreiberverein Bördeblickhalle Rösebeck e.V., n.d.; see Fig. 2). Already before SCS started, the hall had been renovated by volunteers with the aim to create a meeting place and 'smart village hall', encompassing a wide range of modern technologies.

With 1,131 inhabitants, Ovenhausen is larger than Rösebeck. It is located in close distance to and since 1970 is part of the district capital Höxter. In Ovenhausen, the church plays an important role, engaging many community members in activities beyond church service. In the formerly vacant parish house, the Caritas<sup>2</sup> established a '*Klönstube*' (eng., natter parlour) as a meeting point, library, and cultural community centre (see Fig. 2). The Caritas has likewise been the main driver behind the realisation of SCS in the village (Ortschaft Ovenhausen, n.d.). All in all, there exists a vibrant community, apparent in diverse clubs and associations.

The two villages studied in Lippe are Bremke/Rott and Lipperreihe. Bremke and Rott are actually two villages of the municipality Extertal, located at the border to Lower Saxony in a mountainous region characterised by strong settlement sprawl. Together, they have 661 inhabitants. For the SCS project, they united forces to increase the scope and effectiveness of their activities. Before, they have already been engaged in LEADER Northern Lippe, whose funds they used to renovate the engine house of the fire brigade, which is a listed building, and turned it into a community centre (see Fig. 2). The house now serves as a meeting point, event place, and location of the voluntary firefighters (LAG Nordlippe e.V., n.d.).

Lipperreihe, on the other hand, is located in the West of the district and has 3,353 inhabitants. Due to its proximity to Bielefeld, it has a reputation as "*dormitory town*" (OWL20 PubLE). Nevertheless, a range of sports, friends', and community associations contribute to an active civil society in the village. In 2013, the association *Leben in Lipperreihe e.V.* (*LiLi e.V.*) was founded by a group of citizens to establish a local food supply compensating the lack of larger supermarket chains (Leben in Lipperreihe e.V., n.d.; see Fig. 2). The volunteers are furthermore interested in increasing quality of life in the village and maintaining an infrastructure of cultural, social, and public services such as the local school.

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<sup>2</sup> The German Caritas Association e.V. is a welfare organisation of the Catholic Church. It fulfils a variety of tasks, from the provision of social and health services to international humanitarian work.





**Figure 2:** Clockwise from top left: The 'Klönstube' in Ovenhausen, the 'Bördeblickhalle' in Rösebeck, supermarket run by Lili e.V. in Lipperreie (Source: ILS), and the engine house of the voluntary fire brigade in Bremke (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), Grugerio)

### 3.2 Spatial (in-)justice and territorial governance within Höxter and Lippe

#### Analytical Dimension 1: Perception of spatial (in-)justice within the locality

Based on the interviews, **three layers of spatial boundaries** in relation to the action locality could be identified: firstly, the relation between urban and rural areas, secondly, differences between the districts Höxter and Lippe, and thirdly, spatial differentiation of areas within the two districts.

Firstly, in many interviewees' view, **spatial justice implies** having the same chances provided and basic needs covered in urban as well as in rural areas (OWL6 PubLE, OWL33 CivVI): *"Social justice, so to say, must not be dependent on the place of residence."* (OWL11 PubRE) This discourse is present on a national level and high on the agenda of the German government, which aims to foster the **"equality of living conditions"** between urban and rural areas through a special commission founded in 2018 (Die Bundesregierung, 2018).

Both experts acting on a district and regional level and village representatives complained that in the districts Höxter and Lippe, such equality is not achieved, as the provision of infrastructure is most times insufficient. This concerns particularly the road and public

transport network, local supply of daily necessities, health and educational institutions, and – an issue particularly important for the action under study – broadband supply (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI, OWL7 PubRE, OWL11 PubRE, OWL20 PubLE, OWL26 CviVI, OWL21 CviVI, OWL23 CviLI; see Annex 8.3).

In terms of mobility, interviewees noted that to be able to bridge distances in everyday life at least one, if not two cars per household are required (OWL2 PubLI, OWL14 PubLE). Consequently, particularly young and elderly people are perceived as **disadvantaged age groups**, who are dependent on others if wanting to be mobile (OWL14 PubLE, OWL23 CivVI, OWL30 CivVI). Some interviewees described this dependency even as crucial factor for the decreasing attractiveness of the region for young families, thereby fostering demographic change, i.e. outmigration of primarily young people and ageing of the population (OWL7 PubRE, OWL11 PubRE, OWL30 CivVI).

In the view of one of our interviewees, **demographic change** is a continuing process, which will “*not be reversible*” (OWL6 PubLE). Consequently, abovementioned businesses are increasingly experiencing a mismatch between a high job offer and decreasing labour force supply (OWL8 PubLE). For small villages this means that financial strength is decreasing. The interviewee argued: “*The luxury [of a fire station or sports hall per village], we honestly have to say, we cannot afford anymore [...], just from a financial point of view it is idiotic to act in such a way*” (OWL6 PubLE).

Some of the abovementioned respondents understand such lack of infrastructure as a result of structural inequality and thus **spatial injustice towards rural regions**. For instance, the allocation key of financial resources to municipalities by the state was cited as a disadvantage that makes it difficult for municipalities to provide certain services (OWL6 PubLE, OWL36 PubLE). Consequently, civil groups and voluntary workers increasingly take over the provision of services such as local food supply (OWL4 PubLI, OWL16 CivLE). Whereas interviewees feel very proud about their engaged communities, the transfer of (some) public services onto the shoulders of private individuals is perceived as an injustice (Ibid., for more details see Dimension 2).

However, it must be noted that this interpretation of problems is particularly present amongst those actors working on a district or regional level in development projects aiming to improve quality of life in the region (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI, OWL7 PubRE, OWL20 PubLE). Only in one village talk, a similar understanding of urban-rural disparities was expressed (OWL24 CivVI, OWL26 CivVI). Other actors on the most local level were hesitant to speak of rural disadvantages (OWL30 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI).

These differing views can partly be traced back to differences in infrastructure provision amongst the villages under study. A good connection to highways and regional centres as well as the existence of basic services such as a school, kindergartens, or a bakery already make a significant difference in the perception inhabitants have of their village (OWL19 CivVI, OWL30 CivVI, OWL34 CivVI).

In addition to that, even interviewees that recognized structural disparities between urban and rural areas refrained from labelling (parts of) the region as “*disadvantaged*” (OWL1 PubLI, OWL6 PubLE, OWL12 PubLE, OWL13 PubLE). Instead, they emphasized **positive aspects of living in rural areas** and argued that quality of life might be better on the countryside than in large urban agglomerations. There exists a strong discourse amongst both public experts and village representatives around the countryside showing stronger feelings of community and support, higher social control and security as well as closeness to nature (OWL5 MedLE, OWL6 PubLE, OWL12 PubLE, OWL16 CivLE, OWL18



CivVI, OWL19 CivVI, OWL34 CivVI, OWL35 PubRE). One interviewee even predicts *“a renaissance of rural life, as the people are often fed up with life in the cities”* (OWL33 CivVI).

These diverging positions might seem contradictory at first, particularly if coming from the same respondent. Yet, they show that our interviewees do not feel forced to live on the countryside, but they chose to do so because of the abovementioned advantages that rural life provides to them. What they demand is not an equalization of rural and urban life, but political measures that are specifically designed to fit and support rural regions: *“We’re not better or worse than the people in the city [...]. We want to have the same chances”* (OWL33 CivVI).

Secondly, **boundary-making** is observed between the administrative districts Höxter and Lippe. On the one hand, these boundaries are perceived regarding the provision of public services and infrastructure as well as the connection to regional and supra-regional politics. Thereby, Lippe shows closer distance to the larger cities and economic centres of the region than Höxter (OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI, OWL12 PubLE).

On the other hand, **social differences** have an influence on the **production of space**. Interviewees describe Höxter and Lippe as having *“different mind-sets”* (OWL28 CivVI, OWL35 PubRE). Some explained this by the fact that the Catholic Church is dominant in Höxter while the majority of the population in Lippe is protestant (OWL3 PubLE, OWL15 CivLE). According to one respondent, the religious gap is also expressed in political majorities: in Höxter, the Christian Democrats are dominating and in Lippe, the Social Democrats have the majority (OWL15 CivLE).

At the same time, the two districts can be seen as *“two outdistanced districts that ally with one another in view of Bielefeld”* (OWL2 PubLI). Hence, despite differences in mentality and culture, a number of cooperative projects such as SCS have emerged amongst the two districts with the goal to work against various disadvantages rural areas face.

With regard to the **third layer of spatial boundaries**, interviewed experts acting on a district level talked about disparities perceived within the two districts. In the case of Lippe, a division is perceived between East and West (OWL3 PubLE, OWL5 MedLE, OWL8 PubLE, OWL20 PubLE). Whereas the latter is located in close proximity to larger cities and encompasses the district capital Detmold, the East is dominated by sparsely populated villages. Moreover, several factories of the furniture industry, providing one of the main economic sources for the region, closed around the turn of the millennium, leading to a decrease in jobs and population (OWL3 PubLE, OWL8 PubLE).

In Höxter, there is a perceived boundary between South and North (OWL2 PubLI, OWL15 CivLE). This is routed in an administrative district reform from 1974, which united the Northern district of Höxter and the Southern district of Warburg. Consequently, Warburg still pursues over social institutions such as a local district court. One interviewee explained that this difference is still visible in the coverage of the newspapers: *„It can happen that you, if you live in Warburg, you don’t read anything about Höxter for weeks and the other way around”* (OWL15 CivLE).

Such boundaries can furthermore be elevated by **state borders**. Those areas bordering other states often experience a lack of cross-border communication and difficulties in coherent infrastructure provision, as *“[...] the busses do not cross the border”* (OWL13 PubLE). Thus, to visit someone who is in a hospital or rehab in a town which is close-by but belongs to the bordering state, *“[...] – it’s not possible”* (Ibid.) by means of public transport.

Considering individual villages, one politician noted that **topographical contexts** can have a decisive impact on **the production of space**: „*In those mountainous villages, there are technically no neighbours [...], but it is incredibly far apart so that these typical spontaneous encounters while walking the dog are almost not given*” (OWL35 PubRE). Hence, mobilising and networking active community members is of crucial importance here to prevent these villages from becoming dormitory towns (OWL21 CivVI).

In one village talk, on the contrary, it was noted that striving communities, which even expect an influx of inhabitants, can be located just a few kilometres away from villages with strong outmigration (OWL31 CivVI). This view indicates that the development of a village is not only dependent on its location, but additionally, as it was perceived by the interviewees, on its community structure and **self-efficacy of civil society** (OWL31 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI).

Nevertheless, such development is not self-evident, as in villages with an active civil society, fears of a downward spiral likewise exist, triggered by the loss of key infrastructures (OWL19 CivVI, OWL30 CivVI). Consequently, during some interviews the question emerged of which villages should be fought for, i.e. how investments should be best allocated. Several interviewees argued that particularly those villages with a strong community and high potential for civil engagement should be supported (OWL3 PubLE, OWL12 PubLE). In other villages lacking such premises, they argued investments could be ineffective. Accordingly, village inhabitants we talked to saw an engagement in projects like *Smart Country Side* as a possibility to keep their localities ‘alive’ (OWL21 CivVI, OWL25 CivVI, OWL28 CivVI).

## Analytical Dimension 2: Tools and policies for development and cohesion

Generally, interviewees showed a positive attitude and self-confidence regarding the **developmental trajectory** of the region Ostwestfalen-Lippe, especially concerning the overall intact economic structure presented in Chapter 3.1 (OWL2 PubLI, OWL8 PubLE, OWL20 PubLE).

Interviewees engaged in regional and district-level development programmes view the *OWL GmbH* and its cluster of excellence *it's OWL* as important promoters of the region at a national level (OWL3 PubLE, OWL8 PubLE, OWL11 PubRE). They argued that the *OWL GmbH* has helped to ‘brand’ the region and thus foster the attention it is receiving on a supra-regional level (OWL3 PubLE, OWL7 PubRE, OWL8 PubLE, OWL11 PubRE). This can also be seen in terms of digitalisation, where the region tries to promote itself as a leading one. Under the lead of the district Paderborn, Ostwestfalen-Lippe was announced the first ‘digital model region’ of North Rhine-Westphalia in mid-2017 (MWIDE NRW, n.d.).

Additionally, public actors perceive academic institutions such as the *Ostwestfalen-Lippe University of Applied Sciences*<sup>3</sup> as important supporting factors for the development of innovative technologies (OWL7 PubRE, OWL8 PubLE). Through specialised studies, the University does not only keep young people in the region, but attracts newcomers as well. Furthermore, the research institute ‘*Centre for Future Höxter-Holzminden*’ (ger., *Zukunftszentrum Höxter-Holzminden (ZZHH)*), which is run in cooperation with the *Lower Saxon University of Applied Sciences and Art Hildesheim/Holzminden/Göttingen*, sets a positive example of academic collaboration on an inter-state level (OWL36 PubLE).

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<sup>3</sup> The four campuses of the University are located in Detmold, Höxter, Lemgo, and Warburg.

Nevertheless, these positive attributions do not necessarily emanate to all rural areas, as has been mentioned in previous chapters. Many respondents regard hard factors such as the provision of economic and institutional infrastructure and labour as decisive for the future development of an area (OWL10 PubLE, OWL19 CivVI, OWL21 CivVI, OWL23 CivVI). As economic success is very focused on larger cities of the region, namely Bielefeld, Paderborn, and Gütersloh, and the highway A2 as major development axis, the rural Höxter and Lippe are still facing increasing challenges regarding **demographic change and the provision of infrastructure** (OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI, OWL6 PubLE, OWL7 PubRE, OWL8 PubLE).

In this context, some interviewees with political insight stated that the allocation key of the state North Rhine-Westphalia is a **policy hindering spatial justice in rural areas** (OWL6 PubLE, OWL21 CivVI, OWL36 PubLE; see also Dimension 1). Allocation of state resources to the municipalities is based on the number of inhabitants, the relationship between area and population size, the number of state schools in the municipality, social expenses, and the “centrality function” of a municipality (MHKBG NRW, 2018). Especially the latter parameter provides urban agglomerations with more money per capita than smaller municipalities. State representatives argue that such an allocation is necessary, as larger cities fulfil special functions such as the maintenance of universities, theatres, zoos, and fairs (Korfmann, 2018). A development agent in the administrative district Lippe criticises this reasoning: *„This is something that is in fact a disadvantage, because there is no reason for it. [...], I just have to say that every person is equal and consequently everyone counts equally.”* (OWL6 PubLE) Moreover, the provision of basic infrastructure such as waste water treatment and public infrastructure in large, sparsely populated areas is often more costly than in densely populated cities.

In terms of soft infrastructure, however, **voluntary engagement** is perceived to be very high in rural areas (OWL8 PubLE, OWL35 PubLE). As municipalities lack financial strength, voluntary activities are *“always needed on the countryside”* (OWL3 PubLE, OWL15 PubLE). Thereby, village representatives show high levels of self-efficacy: for example, inhabitants complained about their village’s insufficient broadband connection and suggested that they could do it (faster) on their own (OWL25 CivVI). Another example is the association *Lili e.V.* which runs a local supermarket (see Chapter 3.1). Such activities are not only an expression of practical needs, yet offer communities the opportunity to articulate interests and demands, and increase feelings of local identity. At the same time, it is quite difficult for newcomers to enter into such close-knit community structures (OWL34 CivVI).

A range of **federal and regional rural development schemes**, initiatives and pilot projects explicitly aim to support voluntary engagement in rural regions. Most notably, Höxter and Lippe are selected as part of the whole region of Ostwestfalen-Lippe to host the REGIONALE 2022, a federal state development programme (OWL20 PubLE, OWL33 CivVI). REGIONALE 2022 is themed as *‘UrbanLand’* (eng., urban country), aiming to define and promote a new balance between urban and rural areas of the region (OWL GmbH, n.d.). In a long-term perspective, hosting the North Rhine-Westphalian horticulture show in 2033 is already considered as an important local and regional development factor (OWL2 PubLI, OWL33 CivVI). Additionally, programmes like LEADER exist in both Höxter and Lippe and are perceived very positively (OWL6 PubLE, OWL8 PubLE, OWL22 CivVI). These funding schemes give local volunteers the freedom and the necessary support to be able to act independently, which is crucial for the success of civil engagement activities: *“It’s a fact that we would never be able to do without EU funding”* (OWL32 CivVI).

At the same time, such support should not take away but enhance the self-efficacy that civil groups have already developed. Both political and village representatives complained that **rules and regulations are often too strict or complex** and thus not realistically applicable to voluntary activities (OWL18 CivVI, OWL35 PubRE). This problem accounts for complicated funding applications (OWL13 PubLE) as well as questions of insurance or hygiene for events such as self-organised afternoon teas (OWL35 PubRE). As a consequence, people are scared of sanctions and discouraged to apply for funds, or are often disappointed by the small returns of projects, if results of funding programmes are not visible, even after several years (OWL6 PubLE, OWL11 PubLE, OWL13 PubLE, OWL26 CivVI, OWL28 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI).

In this context, local and supra-local politicians demanded that there should be more **support for volunteers** in questions of bureaucracy through full-time jobs (OWL11 PubRE, OWL12 PubLE, OWL35 PubRE). In the district administration of Lippe, an office for voluntary work already exists, but seems not well-known to many (OWL35 PubLE). In one village talk, the establishment of delegates from the district was suggested (OWL19 CivVI). This would allow for more decentralised support, if those delegates would actually approach the volunteers instead of the other way around.

Regarding the scope of existing policies, development agents on the district level point out that there are many programmes available and in fact there might be an overload of projects for rural areas (OWL6 PubLE, OWL13 PubLE). Yet, many interviewees **perceive these policies** to be not sufficiently integrated into existing efforts and argue that they do not achieve to communicate results in a transparent and quick manner. This accounts particularly for integrated municipal development concepts like IKEK<sup>4</sup>, which aim at creating development strategies through public participation and were criticized for **missing impact**. The disappointment in such processes results in many people being very hesitant to participate in follow-up public participation projects (OWL11 PubRE, OWL12 PubLE, OWL13 PubLE, OWL24 CivVI, OWL26 CivVI, OWL28 CivVI).

Nevertheless, interviewees do note efforts for rural areas on a national level, as through the Federal Commission for the **"equality of living standards"** (Der Bundestag, 2018; see Dimension 1). They refer to it as a positive start, which did not show impact in such a short time yet, but has already rendered the issue more attention (OWL6 PubLE, OWL28 CivVI, OWL35 PubRE, OWL36 PubLE).

On the level of administrative districts, the district administrator of Lippe, who was appointed in 2017, initiated a strategic concept called 'Lippe 2025', where ten guiding principles or spheres of activity have been selected to foster a positive development trajectory for the whole district (OWL9 PubLE; Kreis Lippe Der Landrat, 2017). In Höxter, the administration rather has an incremental development approach and is very successful in acquiring supra-regional funding (OWL2 PubLI). One example is the programme *"Land(auf)Schwung"* (eng., rural upswing), where Höxter was chosen as one of 13 funded localities by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL, n.d.). In one village in Höxter, however, it was mentioned that owing to a lack of strategic planning on a municipi-

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<sup>4</sup> IKEK is the abbreviation for an integrated municipal development concept (ger., Integriertes Kommunales Entwicklungskonzept). It is an important instrument for rural and community planning strategies whose main purpose is to develop measures aiming at a mutual future strategy for all villages or areas the municipality is composed of. The package of measures is mostly created on the basis of a SWOT-analysis where opportunities and challenges are locally defined which justify funding from a state, national or EU level. That is why IKEK and other community development programmes are often co-funded by means of EAFRD, EFRD or ESF. (cf. MBWSV NRW, 2015).

pality level, projects are not as effective as they could be, if they would be strategically embedded (OWL26 CivVI, OWL28 CivVI).

Despite the abovementioned challenges for rural areas, some trends were mentioned which could attract young people and families in the future, if they are strategically pursued by decision-makers: the increasing promotion of work-life balance and possibilities for home office given by employers (OWL11 PubLE, OWL22 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI, OWL35 PubRE). Thus, housing problems in metropolitan regions could and do already lead to processes of counter-urbanization and a *“renaissance of rural life”* (OWL33 CivVI; Henger and Oberst, 2019; see also Dimension 1).



## 4. The Action *Smart Country Side*

### 4.1 Basic Characteristics of the Action

*Smart Country Side* is part of a region-wide ERDF-funded integrated strategic programme called “OWL 4.0 – Industry, Work, Society” (ger., OWL 4.0 – Industrie, Arbeit, Gesellschaft). *Smart Country Side* was granted funding as one of ten overall projects. The action is supervised and coordinated by the *OWL GmbH*. The overall thematic umbrella for all projects is the topic of a regional digital transformation process which main aims are (OWL GmbH 2015, pp. 17):

- to support SMEs in digital transformation processes
- to open up potentials for start-ups or new business segments
- to establish digital competence networks
- to increase implementation orientation of regional universities and research institutes
- to compile solutions for future societal challenges with the help of concrete model projects
- to become a prototype for a regional digitalisation cluster in North Rhine-Westphalia

Hence, many projects are dealing with Business 4.0, Work 4.0, or Industry 4.0 for SME. *SCS*, on the contrary, focuses the penultimate aspect of integrating the public and communities in the digitalisation process. This is quite a unique feature within the program. Almost all other projects of *OWL 4.0* have been initiated by business-oriented agencies and initiatives. Besides two place-based actions undertaken by the responsible cities, the conversion of a former airfield and the construction of an educational facility, the remaining projects are working towards specific digital business solutions or networks. *Smart Country Side* instead tries to improve living conditions in the administrative districts of Höxter and Lippe by offering new digital ways for civic participation and engagement.

*“Basically we wanted to approach the people in order to see: ‘What do you want to do with digitalisation in the localities?’” (OWL1 PubLI)*

*Smart Country Side* was initiated in 2013 and is executed by the two respective municipal business development agencies of the districts Höxter and Lippe (OWL1 PubLE, OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI). The project is funded by the Ministry of Work, Health and Social of North Rhine-Westphalia (MAGS NRW) and means of the EFRD for more than three years (April 2016 to August 2019). Two and a half full-time employees have been engaged, who coordinate the action.

The project structure of *Smart Country Side* comprises three major components: Firstly, 16 villages were selected to create their own content for a digital platform called “village app”. **Village conferences** were conducted, where interested residents were invited to discuss and develop digital solutions for their local needs. Ideas ranged from E-Health applications, a smart church platform, and the development of a “caring community” to digital village chronicles. Furthermore, the participating villages have been facilitated with **digital technical infrastructure**. Last but not least, this process has been accompanied by **digital training courses** for local volunteers and events like lectures or field trips dealing with various aspects of digitalisation.

For the selection process, Höxter and Lippe chose different approaches (see Fig. 3). In Höxter, mayors of all ten municipalities were contacted to activate villages attending a tendering procedure for which they could propose up to three ideas for digital applications. The bid proposal requested amongst others information on existing digital initia-

tives, the degree of capacity utilisation of the community centres, and the overall structure of local associations. The project coordinator toured all bidding villages and discussed with village spokespersons and other local stakeholders. Altogether, 15 villages in Höxter were visited, whereof 14 applied. A jury decided about the tender proposals. Six localities, which participated in the tender, became the status of 'golden villages', the other ones remained attached as 'silver villages'.

In Lippe, potential villages were firstly selected based on spatial criteria (villages with a suburban character, peripheral villages, intermediate villages 'in between' the two first categories, villages in proximity of a state or district border, and topographically shaped villages). The assumption behind such selection was that these spatial characteristics would influence project implementation and thus yield insights for future strategies. Thus, contact persons in administration and politics with local know-how were asked to suggest potential candidates. In a second step, the respective mayors and the most relevant associations of the villages were contacted, to ask whether they were interested in participating. In the end, ten 'model villages' were chosen. Previous policy experiences and knowledge about local community structures had an influence on the different approaches to selection in the two districts (see Dimension 3).

Following the selection process, village conferences took place in all participating localities, chaired by external moderators. In these conferences every single village could discuss its own ideas for digital applications. Based upon the conferences, workshop groups were established in each locality, working on specific topics based on the previous discussion (OWL2 PubLI). In parallel, events and field trips were organised by SCS project coordinators to bring local people in contact with the possibilities of digitalisation. In Höxter, digital training courses for volunteers have started in Summer 2018 and community centres have been equipped with digital technical infrastructure (OWL2 PubLI, OWL15 PubLE). In Lippe, such training courses have begun in December 2018.



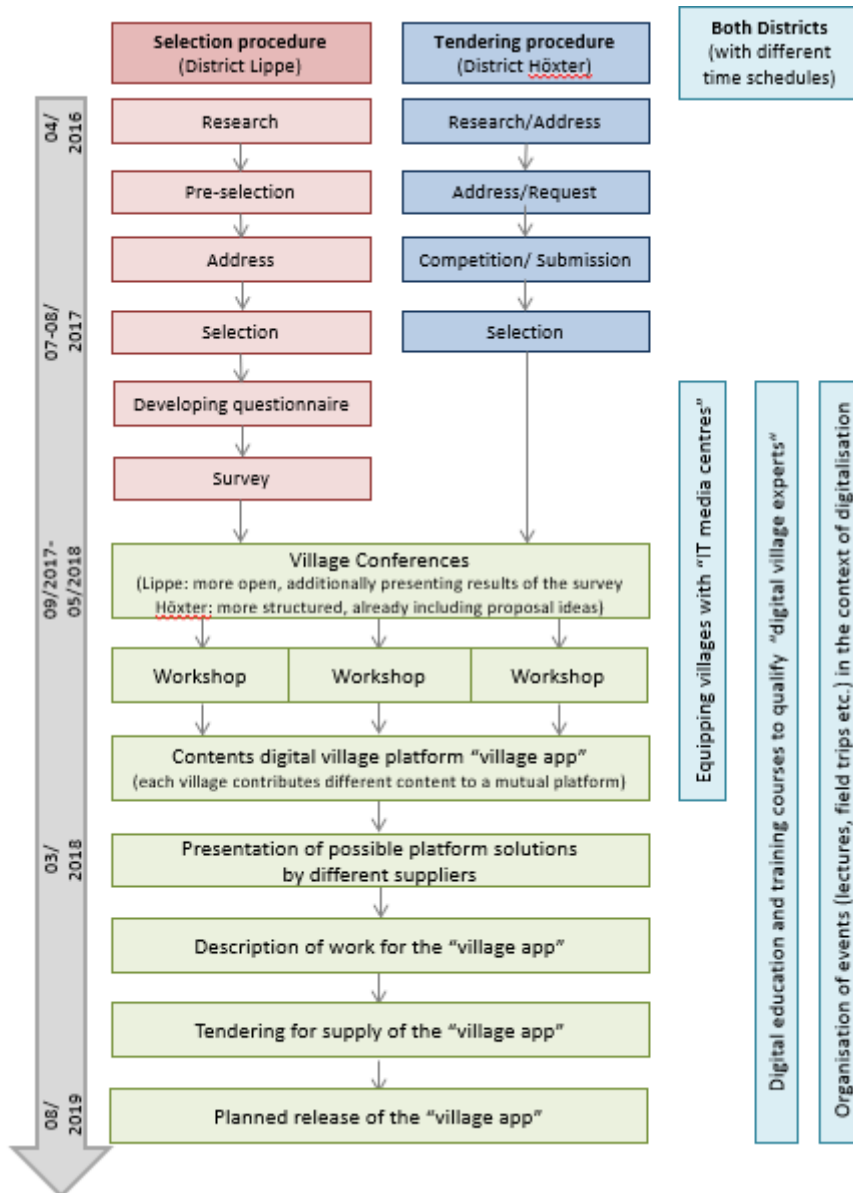


Figure 3: Smart Country Side project process in Höxter and Lippe (Source: ILS)

## 4.2 Evaluation of the Implementation of the Action in Höxter and Lippe

### Analytical Dimension 3: Coordination and implementation of the action in the locality under consideration

The biggest challenge for the SCS project has been to promote a participative bottom-up approach while simultaneously being limited in time and funds. Therefore, project coordinators **defined selection criteria** and chose to **rely on already existing activities and structures** in the villages. Villages should not exceed a certain amount of inhabitants due to manageability. Village workshops in form of IKEK or LEADER processes should already have been conducted. Thus, basic know-how in voluntary and project management structures in the villages was ensured. In general, SCS searched for active localities which were also interested in digital activities.

*„It should be, so to speak, a very active local community. So we requested like how many volunteers are associated in clubs. Partly, we even demanded a list with their names. Then, we wanted to know how actively community centres and citizen halls have been used recently. [...] Another important point was openness for digitalisation. That means that the village should have an interest in trying this project out together with us.” (OWL2 PubLI)*

Due to the fact that the whole district is a LEADER area and thus various participation processes in the villages had taken place before, the project coordinators in Höxter decided in favour of a tendering procedure. Similar experience and insights into the capability of local community structures to carry out such a project were not available for the whole district of Lippe. Therefore, in Lippe, a survey was conducted preliminary to the village conferences to gather comparable information about community structures. The survey asked for the most relevant issues residents were concerned with. It was organised and distributed in collaboration with engaged local associations, giving them the chance to add additional items to the questionnaire. Moreover, such process helped to get in contact and involve representatives of local associations as multipliers and trusted interface to the local communities (OWL1 PubLI).

As a result of the selection procedures, a feeling of competition was observed amongst the villages. For instance, in Höxter, the status of “golden” and “silver villages” raised some issues within the localities because it was regarded as a descending order. Project coordinators tried to overcome these difficulties by supporting all of the tendering villages and hence allowed some additional villages to participate in project elements. Residents from these localities could also participate in digital training and education courses and their community centres have been equipped with digital technical infrastructure as well (OWL2 PubLI, OWL15 PubLE).

*„There have been made a few critical enquiries. But compared to the ‘golden villages’, the ‘silver villages’ have been... – you would assume that they have fallen off. But no, we said we would like to value their efforts, because they applied just as well. So, they have been put in a funding programme called ‘strengthening digital competencies’ which only is effective for Höxter. Plus five additional alternate villages. So, we now have three categories of villages and altogether 16 in support.” (OWL2 PubLI)*

According to the quote above, another asset of SCS has been the **structure of coordination** in terms of combination of different funding schemes and collaboration with project partners. For example, technical infrastructure as well as digital education and training courses have been organised and co-financed by federal funds that project partners like local adult education centres and vocational colleges applied for. This worked particularly well in Höxter (OWL15 PubLE, OWL26 CivVI). Similarly, in Lippe, LEADER funds have been mobilised for co-financing specific additional parts of the project in a way that *“the municipalities do not have any financial burden”* (OWL6 PubLE). Basis for a successful integration of various funding programmes has been the **mode of leadership** of OWL 4.0, which acts as a *“platform and service provider”* (OWL7 PubRE) with merely framing or *“monitoring character”* (Ibid.).

Due to thematic correspondence in E-Health issues, closest linkages on the regional level exist between the projects of *Health 4.0* and SCS. Employees of the project *Health 4.0* contributed for example to the village conferences by giving input on possible E-Health applications, which could be integrated into *Smart Country Side* (OWL29 CivRE). This thematic focus was not planned from the beginning onwards, yet it was enabled by a very **open conceptualisation** of the project (OWL1 PubLI). This has been one of the big strengths of

SCS, because different, already existing initiatives could be integrated in the participating villages. For example, a member of the project team explained that the topic of E-Health was willingly picked up by the locals themselves in the village conferences:

*“Actually, this idea [E-Health applications] originated from the village conferences. Sure, in the villages they are excited about rooms for telemedicine for example. But I can’t match that with my budget. That’s why it will not work out in this project [Smart Country Side]. But [we] are trying to find other funding schemes to proceed.”*  
(OWL4 PubLI)

As SCS has been the only project within the OWL 4.0 scheme, which directly addresses citizens, local politicians wanted to participate in questions of strategic orientation of the project (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL3 PubLE, OWL11 PubRE). Thus, a political advisory board has been installed shortly after the beginning of the project, which influenced the **decision-making capacity** of the project coordinators. Objective of this board was to ensure close contacts to local and regional policy-makers, who can support the project with their networks and know-how (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI). At the beginning, **distribution of power** between project coordinators and the advisory board in decision-making processes was not quite clear:

*“I can remember very well the constitutive meeting of the political advisory board. There was still quite a competition about specific approaches and thematic foci.”*  
(OWL3 PubLE)

In particular, the topic of mobility was brought into consideration by politicians in the advisory board (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL3 PubLE, OWL11 PubRE). However, project coordinators could refer to the survey results, showing that mobility is not that significant to the respondents. In this case and in others, SCS project management would take up an advocacy role and argue from a point of view of the participating villages (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI). This was clearly helpful for retaining or transferring decision-making capacities to the local level of the villages.

**Networking between the different participating villages** was aimed to be achieved by collective training courses of ‘digital village experts’ and joint events (OWL2 PubLI, OWL25 CivVI, OWL34 CivVI). 150 ‘digital village experts’ have been recruited in Höxter, who should subsequently spread their knowledge into the communities (OWL2 PubLI, OWL32 CivVI). In this context, heterogeneity of the training course participants concerned project coordinators the most, as finding course leaders and creating a suitable curriculum for groups with a very diverse set of digital know-how was a considerable problem (OWL15 PubLE, OWL27 CivVI, OWL32 CivVI). Yet, this was evaluated quite positively by the participants and has only been an issue in the beginning (OWL15 PubLE, OWL31 CivVI, OWL32 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI). Respondents particularly liked the open and flexible structure of the courses (OWL26 CivVI, OWL32 CivVI), while perceiving long and time-consuming travel distances as the greatest challenge (OWL25 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI). SCS was even credited for the selected approach with the innovation prize of the German Institute of Adult Education in 2018 together with the local adult education centre (DIE, n.d.).

#### **Analytical Dimension 4: Autonomy, participation and engagement**

Activation and empowerment processes initiated by SCS generally have been following the logic of “train the trainer” (OWL2 PubLI). The aim of **participation** was to implement a structure that helped the villages in capacity-building. Though, realising a project that

used digitalisation as a tool to solve analogue problems was viewed quite sceptically at the beginning, especially in light of insufficient broadband infrastructure.

*“That was interesting. Because the first question of course was: ‘What do they want here when we do not even have broadband?’” (OWL2 PubLI)*

In some of the selected SCS villages, previous participation processes had been experienced as exhausting and long-lasting without clear returns in form of tangible outcomes for the villages (see Dimension 2). Citizens are often asked for their opinions, yet their plans are not realised. This is critically reflected by public and civil stakeholders alike.

*“In the context of participation processes we always talk about the important bottom-up approach. [...] People should tell us which opportunities they see, which threats they see, which strengths and which weaknesses they think their localities might have. I, who I am daily involved in that, perceive that as exhausting.” (OWL6 PubLE)*

*“Everywhere they start to stick some dots due to SWOT-analysis and so on, people are sick and tired of it.” (OWL33 CivVI)*

SCS, in contrast, quickly provided tangible outputs for the villages. Local residents, partly for the first time, had the feeling that their efforts have been worth it.

*“With Smart Country Side you had the feeling that it really turns out. That the money really gets down here. That as a model village – you had to apply to become a ‘golden village’ – you knew that if you had cleared this last hurdle, you would get something back from the project. The effort is worth it. [...] We have already benefitted.” (OWL28 CivVI)*

Especially the equipment of community centres with digital technical infrastructure and the training courses contributed to the positive perception of the project, as a village representative emphasizes:

*“And I said: Folks, at the end of the day some things have to be visible. Not only some flashes or some stimuli in digital ways. No, you have to see something. And these are the IT media centres, the training courses. [...] So, the villages get something which is valuable. Hence, we are content so far with the approach.” (OWL33 CivVI)*

Similarly, the format of the village conferences has been evaluated quite well (OWL18 CivVI, OWL19 CivVI, OWL21 CivVI). In one locality in Lippe, the village even continued this format on their own, because it was rated as an effective tool for triggering participation processes (OWL4 PubLI, OWL21 CivVI).

In spite of the positive evaluation of the participation process in general, **questions of legitimacy** have been present in the localities. In Lippe, conflicts of representativeness shone through concerning which persons should represent the villages (OWL1 PubLI). This issue might be related to the selection procedure in Lippe, which was accompanied by using local associations as interface into the villages. While having lots of positive aspects, the chosen approach likewise had negative effects. For example, some people did not feel represented by these structures and on one occasion an association tried to use the village conference as stage to promote their own interests (OWL4 PubLI).

In the wider context of **participation and engagement** in rural areas, promoting ‘young talents’ often means activating people who are about to retire (OWL12 PubLE, OWL16 CivLE). Hence, merely the “*usual suspects*”, always playing an active role in participatory processes and civic engagement, mostly middle-aged men and women, who do not work full-time, contributed to the project (OWL15 PubLE, OWL16 CivLE). Despite the ‘young’ and modern topic of digitalisation, SCS was not able to engage many new volunteers, especially young people. Accordingly, how to get in touch with this target group was an issue of discussion in one village conference in Lippe (FG3).

The tendering procedure in Höxter had some negative implications as well. On the one hand, efforts of the villages, which successfully applied to become a ‘golden village’ have been valued through the competition (the winning of the bid described by a public administration employee as “*honey of the volunteers*” (OWL12 PubLE)). On the other hand, those localities which were not as successful with their bids have been dissatisfied with the process. A few even withdrew completely from the project, although there was the option to remain ‘silver village’.

SCS project coordinators felt that with the different approaches of selection in Höxter and Lippe, diverging expectations arose: because villages in Höxter passed through a tendering process, it was felt that “*they want us to deliver. There is a totally different sense of entitlement behind it*” (OWL2 PubLI).

Subsequently, **expectation management** has been one of the biggest challenges for SCS. One project coordinator even considered it “*the most important success criterion*” (OWL1 PubLI) for the project in general. However, this has not only been important on the level of project coordination, yet for spokespersons in the villages as well. One village representative told that they have been reluctant to activate locals at an early stage of the project, because they did not want to “*raise a gigantic bubble of expectations that potentially would burst*” (OWL21 CivVI), leading to “*big frustrations*” (Ibid.).

In favour of successful expectation management, **transparent communication processes** and retaining close connections to the villages have been regarded as two of the key factors (OWL7 PubRE). In some respect this worked well, while in other instances this was challenging. In terms of communication processes, the village spokespersons we interviewed evaluated the project very differently. Some described their relationship to project coordinators as very close and had “*the feeling that whatever you come up with, you will be heard. And that we won’t be put over from top-down*” (OWL21 CivVI). Others, though being located in the same district and dealing with the same contact persons, had a “*feeling that people consider us being too naïve or stupid, as if we don’t know anything about digitalisation and apps and smartphones and everything else*” (OWL30 CivVI).

In one village, there was perceived a gap between demands on the localities and given information as well as the general project progress.

*“Sometimes one has the feeling that the project could run a little bit faster. It’s like idling. What is happening there? Stop and go. On the other side, one has the feeling that every time one has to deliver, as a community, it has to happen quite fast.”*  
(OWL28 CivVI)

Village spokespersons’ expectations and satisfaction with the project progress depend heavily on (negative) experiences with previous processes in the localities. Likewise, different individual capabilities (in terms of capability to access and use information and communication technologies, former experience in local development, or volunteers’ pro-



fessional background) play a role. At the same time, it seems that delays in the project progress and the reasons behind were not always made sufficiently transparent to the village representatives.

The biggest issue within the communication process and the project time schedule which was critically pointed to in all village interviews we conducted has been the delayed implementation of the 'village app' due to problems in the call for bids.

*"There was this event [...] where basically the providers should be evaluated. I think that wasn't received very well [by the locals]. Meanwhile this whole procedure was overturned once again. It has to be renewed." (OWL18 CivVI)*

But even in the call for bid process, a village spokesperson with administrative insight had a different perspective on the process and portrayed the village's role in the bidding procedure as quite self-efficacious. Village representatives generally acknowledged that projects can fail and are ought to trial and error (OWL28 CivVI, OWL32 CivVI). Villagers also admitted that some problems the project underwent are **accountable to higher levels**, which might decelerate the process (OWL21 CivVI, OWL28 CivVI), such as statutory conditions for public proceedings. This perspective was confirmed by an interviewee on the regional level which also claimed that the project was perhaps too ambitious.

*"But you see that such a project can't be done in three years. [...]. Such projects are lacking flexibility to speed up [the process], to be faster." (OWL7 PubRE)*

Accordingly, some interviewees demanded more competence and **autonomy** for the local level in order to achieve a successful and sustainable community development.

*"We really have to look for passing back autonomy to the villages to some extent or maintaining it. And this does only work by giving people the right to decide about needs of the villages once again. That is really important to me. It's called principle of subsidiarity." (OWL12 PubLE)*

It was stated that "a lot of villages lost the belief in themselves" (OWL33 CivVI) due to a lack of direct democratic decision-making capacity and a higher degree of autonomy would raise self-confidence and self-efficacy of the communities again (OWL13 PubLE). However, most times it was not specified how more autonomy should look like in practical terms, besides the point that villages should be able to decide about small budgets more independently (OWL11 PubRE).

### **Analytical Dimension 5: Expression and mobilisation of place-based knowledge and adaptability**

In terms of governance structure, *OWL GmbH* and *OWL 4.0* have provided support rather than taking influence on detailed project management issues (see Dimension 3). This has given a **high degree of flexibility** to *Smart Country Side* in general. Though, *SCS* project coordinators described balancing regulative restrictions with a participative bottom-up approach while at the same time maintaining reasonable project efficiency as particularly challenging. Thus, a project coordinator stated with respect to the elaborated call for tender of the app implementation "[...] I hope that the momentum does not [change]" (OWL2 PubLI), referring to the danger of 'fatigue' caused by the lack of progress during this time.

That is why measures with tangible outputs accompanying the process have been so useful within the project context. Digital education and training courses as well as events and

trips affiliated to all sorts of digital matters have been especially positively evaluated by local volunteers:

*"[...] and then an older woman told me: 'If digitalisation is so cool, then I'm looking forward to it.'" (OWL31 CivVI)*

In contrast to other participative processes that previously took place in Höxter and Lippe, SCS not only asked for the villagers' **place-based knowledge**, but really used it to implement specific local outcome (OWL6 PubRE, OWL11 PubRE, OWL24 CivVI, OWL33 CivVI). Local interviewees, both public and civil stakeholders, argued that place-based knowledge is important for successful project implementation.

*"I think rural areas do really know well what their problems are. The chairman of the sports club knows it, the chairman of the heritage society knows it, the mayor of the municipality knows it, the councillors know it, the regional management knows it, and the district of Lippe knows it. We need less work on concept development. Consultant agencies are the only ones who benefit from that. The region is not helped on by concept development." (OWL6 PubLE)*

At the same time, concerns of an **"overload of demands"** for civic engaged volunteers in the villages have been raised (OWL6 PubLE, OWL8 PubLE, OWL13 PubLE, OWL15 PubLE). Especially, because often few particular people run these processes on the local level:

*"Such engagement is often not necessarily characterised by a critical mass. Commonly, it is down to [...] mostly one person who is very active [...]." (OWL13 PubLE)*

It has been in favour of SCS that digitalisation as cross-sectional topic has been compatible with all sort of already existing local initiatives in the villages and volunteers with different digital know-how. For example, training courses for 'digital village experts' have been so far successful despite being composed very heterogeneously of *"the ones who are absolute experts and the others being fools"* (OWL15 PubLE, OWL33 CivVI).

Though digitalisation is an important issue for the future development, it was mentioned throughout all interviews that digital applications should not replace but be combined with and thereby promote local communications flows. In order not to produce misleading effects, local social capital should be preserved and strengthened, because it is the most important asset rural areas possess (OWL4 PubLI).

*"Digitalisation is important and it's good that it proceeds in the district, but it does by no means replace local communications, because that's what villages consist of. If we will be anonymised like in the cities, eventually we lost more than we gained." (OWL13 PubLE)*

This could be the reason why the project was not as successful in one village, where volunteers had already started to implement their own app and analogue issues, like retaining the local primary school, were more urgent to the community. The mismatch between what the project could offer and the village hoped to gain was too big.

*"It appeared quite clearly that there has been a split between analogue issues that we [referring to the project coordinators] don't care about much, and digital issues that we care about." (OWL18 CivVI)*



In terms of **organisational learning**, inter-communal collaboration between the districts Höxter and Lippe generated learning effects with regards to the political advisory board (OWL1 PubLI, OWL2 PubLI, OWL29 CivLE) but likewise through the project's manifold activities for local stakeholders in both of the districts.

*“Let alone the collaboration of these two districts, thereby an inter-communal collaboration developed which is surely something that isn't taken for granted. A lot is based on confidence-building measures, on practical cooperation, on meetings you undergo together. [...] And I have got the impression that this is working well, even between these two local authorities. Meanwhile they also succeeded in creating a supra-regional visibility in public relations.” (OWL29 CivRE)*

SCS project coordinators also showed expansive **flexibility and organisational learning** by reacting cleverly to arising complaints about lacking broadband supply in former village conferences. In later stages, they invited the person in charge for planning broadband constructions in the governmental district of Detmold to the village conferences and integrated some time for questions and appeals.

Nevertheless, **project sustainability** is not yet warranted. For instance, responsibilities for consequential costs for hosting, maintaining and updating the 'village app' are uncertain so far. Project coordinators are currently working towards solutions (OWL2 PubLI, OWL4 PubLI). However, an interviewee noted that alongside the consequential costs there will also be the need for professional coordination in the aftermath of the project to sustain SCS' achievements:

*“And I really think that somehow a professional contact person is needed who keeps track of it [the project]. [...] It has to be a person who of course knows the whole system, who knows why things have been done this way, who knows the discussion and if problems occur locally, who can say proactively, ‘Once in a month I will come to you.’, who drives around and cares about everything is running.” (OWL3 PubLE)*

This suggestion supports the demands of local stakeholders to generally introduce more localised full-time support for voluntary activities in rural areas (see Dimension 2).

## 5. Final Assessment: Capacities for Change

Reflecting upon the analysis of empirical findings in the previous sections, we now turn to an overall assessment of the action and its outcomes out of the perspective of procedural and distributional justice. The focus of our analysis is threefold, with a focus (Dimension A) first on the effects of the action on the participating villages and local communities and what is influencing the effects in terms of promoting and limiting factors; second (Dimension B) on the institutional set-up of the action and structural effects on the way how to organise politics in the future, and (Dimension C) third on factors influencing the impact and long-terms effects of the action.

### Synthesising Dimension A: Assessment of promoters and inhibitors

We conclude from our previous analysis that the *SCS* project has been quite successful in deploying local social capital in form of local engagement and place-based knowledge. Compared with national routines and standard procedures in regional and local development planning, *SCS* has raised and involved local knowledge, local participation, and engagement in the participating villages to a remarkably high degree.

As argued above, a specific challenge of *SCS* has been to promote a participative bottom-up approach while simultaneously being limited in time and funds. Within these limits, *SCS* has managed to integrate local communities into the development of the project quite well content- and process-wise. This is evidenced by the fact that village representatives could – within a given frame – decide autonomously on the local focus of digitalisation and thus the specific villages' needs were taken into account. The *SCS* project has also aimed for extensive outreach to village people in the process, as evidenced by organising conferences and workshops in the villages as well as asking locals to participate in village questionnaires on their local concerns and training courses.

This bottom-up approach is supported by a high degree of flexibility, which *OWL GmbH*, as the inter-municipal coordinator of the regional digital transformation process, provided for the implementation of the *SCS* project management. This institutional set-up has allowed for an experimental and innovative character of the project, going beyond routinized administrative standards and procedures in rural local development. The experimental and model character of the action is at the same time a weakness in terms of the sustainability of effects, as it is not completely clear how the action is sustained in the selected pilot villages and how the impetus of the project is integrated into regional and district development politics in the long term.

With regards to factors which promote or constrain **procedural justice** (a 'fair process') one could identify as a critical factor in the *SCS* project the balance of expectations, investments, and returns in the management and implementation process. The level of engagement in the participating villages has been impressive. Once local communities are taken serious in their role as experts for their local environment, community members invest an impressive level of time, skills, and energy into actions which benefit their own community and potentially could help to improve the situation of vulnerable communities (in this case elderly and immobile population groups). Conditions apply, however: community resources (like time, skills, energy, knowledge) are a precious and limited social capital and local communities expect concrete results and visible outcomes in return for their investments. In those villages which had participated in municipal or regional projects with a similar extensive outreach to the local community but which in the end did not deliver clear visible results to the local community, frustration was clearly noticeable (see

Dimension 4). Thus, expectations were very high that *SCS* would provide the promised results. This probably also explains part of the irritations caused by the delay in the call for bids for the village app.

Secondly, and with regards to factors which promote or limit **distributive justice** (a fair distribution of resources and opportunities), it is obvious that this kind of social capital is not ubiquitously available, yet that there are villages which would not be able to raise a similar level of civic engagement. The *SCS* approach works well in local villages with high levels of citizen engagement, and the villages have been selected accordingly. But the aim of *SCS*, to promote better quality of life and citizen engagement through digital means, would not work equally well in less functional or marginalised local communities to the same extent. This raises questions about how to strengthen less strong villages, which is discussed in more detail in Dimension C.

The achievements of *SCS* in the local villages have been influenced by a range of location-specific, thematic, management, and institutional **promoting factors**:

- strong local social capital, a critical number of very active volunteers with personal networks and know-how, partly originating from their professional background;
- digitalisation as a cross-sectional topic, compatible with all sort of already existing local initiatives in the villages;
- the open and experimental project structure which allowed to discuss and define the priorities of the action in co-operation with village representatives;
- flexibility and adaptability in the project management;
- provision of tangible outputs: events, field trips, and digital training courses for volunteers played an essential role to motivate and sustain local community participation over the course of the project;
- and the fact that the *SCS* project coordinators are integrated into the established structures of the districts' administration and advised by a political advisory board potentially allows for cross-fertilisation and learning between the districts' regular administration and the project management. While in the short run, this requires additional negotiation processes; in the long run such set-up is likely to promote the sustainable impact of a project.

However, a range of **inhibiting factors** are linked to the *SCS* project as well:

- the implementation of the project builds upon the potentials of active local communities, as a prerequisite which is not available everywhere;
- flexibility and responsiveness to local needs is an asset of the project and at the same time the whole process has been rather resource-intensive for the village representatives, specifically given the (short) project duration;
- the differing demands and expectations of village representatives on the project's progress need to be managed continuously. One needs to be aware that bottom-up processes are more demanding in terms of personnel and time resources requested for the project co-ordination (compared to conventional administrative procedures);
- and as happens with many other experimental or model projects too, the potential sustainability and mainstreaming of *SCS* is being discussed and solved towards the end of the project only; while this is understandable on the one hand, as one wants to explore first how effective the action is, there is also the danger of decreasing enthusiasm of local volunteers to participate in repeating model project rounds if a strategic and long-term vision is missing.

## Synthesising Dimension B: Competences and capacities of stakeholders

A main mechanism **producing spatial injustice** in the locality and its wider region is an ongoing trend of concentration of people and work in urban areas. One could speak of a relative process of peripheralization of sparsely populated parts of the region over the last decades. Within Ostwestfalen-Lippe, disparities between the more central (bigger cities like Bielefeld or Paderborn and their surroundings) and the more peripheral parts of the region are growing over the last years and at the same time, there is competition between these regional centres with other German metropolitan areas.

Demographic challenges and service provision vary between localities in Ostwestfalen-Lippe, but many villages are suffering from ageing and problems of access to basic services. This is specifically the case for Höxter and Lippe, the districts under study, – despite the fact that Ostwestfalen-Lippe as a whole is home to various globally acting companies and thus according to economic indicators performing well. In various expert interviews, a growing urban-rural divide is thus identified as a main driver producing spatial injustice (see Dimension 1). Political attention and funding, as stated in interviews, was perceived to have focused mainly on the metropolitan areas over the last years, and thus had done little to counteract a process of slow degradation of standards and quality of life in the more peripheral rural parts, including quality of and access to broadband, healthcare, and transport.

Nevertheless, experts acknowledged that the policy agenda had shifted and that there was more attention now towards the challenges of rural, sparsely populated areas in Germany in general, and likewise towards the region under study. This is evidenced by federal state as well as national political discourse and new funding lines and priorities. In light of societal and political trends towards a rising sense of work-life balance in younger age groups, growing possibilities of doing home office given by employers, and rapidly increasing rents and housing prices in metropolitan areas, some interviewees even suggested a ‘rural renaissance’, especially amongst young families (cf. Henger & Oberst, 2019).

Within this wider context, what is the **potential of a localised action**? In all of the 16 villages, local community initiatives are actively dealing with the challenges of maintaining villages as an attractive place to live, for the younger ones as well as for the elderly. This includes initiatives such as establishing and running a local supermarket (Lipperreihe), or a village hall (Rösebeck), or community centres (Ovenhausen and Bremke/Rott). Partly, these are autonomous actions by the community, partly they are developed in the frame of LEADER (see village hall in Bremke/Rott) or in co-operation with local authorities or the local church (Ovenhausen).

The villages under study and the whole region show a remarkably high level of civic engagement, yet community activities naturally will only have small-scale local impacts and cannot counteract wider structural trends and processes, which are at the heart of spatial injustice as perceived by the respondents (rural-urban divide, outmigration, etc.). Small-scale and community activities thus need to be integrated in and supported by a wider policy approach to face the challenges and promote the attractiveness of rural villages as a place to live. A cross-district project like *Smart Country Side* can be regarded as a good starting point for further programmes and policies in this direction.

The project’s setup has allowed for the participation of citizens from the lowest possible level, villagers in our case, in the design and implementation of the project’s outcomes in a way, which suited the specific characteristics of the different villages. Overall, village community representatives **valued the project’s approach to participation of villagers**

**and empowering villages.** Project coordinators were well known to the community representatives. Though, transparency of communication processes was evaluated differently, communication with project coordinators was seen as easy and they were viewed as quite responsive to the needs of the village communities.

Others, however, were more critical and raised questions why the villages had to stick to a predefined portfolio of funded activities from which to choose and could not decide more autonomously on investment priorities for the villages themselves. However, policy makers discussed passing lump sums to community groups as being legally not allowed. Behind this issue is possibly a wider and more general debate, which **questions the funding of projects when larger issues are at stake** and the villages are on the verge of losing key infrastructures, such as closing the local school or the last local shop. There is a wider discontent with (limited) project funding, when the perceived issues at stake are of a more structural nature. Accordingly, village representatives generally called for a higher degree of autonomy and giving village people more rights to decide about needs of the villages (see Dimension 4).

Nevertheless, most of the community representatives from the four villages evaluated the flexibility for setting their own priorities as sufficient and actually said that the openness of the project design and the fact **to bring in their own interests had been a decisive factor for participation in the project**. There is thus a direct link between the way how the project was set-up and organised (the processes) and the local acceptance and willingness of villagers to invest time and resources in the project. As argued above, community engagement in local and regional development is a scarce, non-ubiquitous and at the same time precious resource. Community representatives which invest into processes that do not create any tangible outcomes in the end will experience frustrations and lose interest in further requests for their involvement.

As noted above (see Dimension A), *SCS* was successful in deploying place-based knowledge and the flexible and experimental approach of the project design has supported this. The selected action thus is quite a novelty in the German context. At the time of writing this report, the *SCS* project has raised national interest for its approach and outcomes. Despite the federal structure and a generally decentralised mode of governance in Germany on the one hand, and with municipalities and rural districts being autonomous in the sense of local-self-government, on the other hand, it is fair to say that active participation and involvement of local communities and social groups in policy development has a not very strong tradition (see Annex 8.4). Within this political-administrative context and the (short) project duration, the action has integrated bottom-up engagement into its approach as best as possible.

At the same time, and promoting approaches such as the *SCS* project, there is wide-spread recognition today among political-administrative actors that local development in sparsely populated regions calls for new forms of governance. For central, regional and local governments, it is quite challenging to maintain services of general interest and quality of life in rural areas, at times of reduced budgets. To cope with these challenges, new forms of co-operation between (local) state and community actors are required.

*“But I nevertheless think a village without a community and without this social scale and without neighbourly support will not work at long sight.” (OWL4 PubLI)*



## Synthesising Dimension C: Connecting the action to procedural and distributive justice

In a regional context of outmigration and the increasing need to attract and keep young and well-qualified people in the region, the researched action aims at strengthening social cohesion and quality of life in rural villages. How to use digital platforms and tools is up to local priorities of the local villages. Within the given project frame, there is flexibility to allow for a church app in one village and a smart village hall in another village. The project rests upon the participation of local villagers and indeed requires a high level of commitment from the villagers' side. Village conferences have been organised for discussing local priorities, 'digital village experts' are being trained to spread digital competence in the villages, and additional workshops and events with representatives from all villages have taken place providing expert input on different aspects of digitalisation, from data protection to digital health services. The local village community representatives have invested considerable resources into the process: their local expertise on how to use the digital tools for a sustainable development of their village; their local knowledge on how to address and involve local villagers in the project; and a considerable amount of time and energy. The action thus has managed to raise substantial community resources and at the same time **the place-based and community-oriented approach is the decisive factor for the effects and outcomes** of the project. With regards to distributional justice, the action contributes to the digital inclusion of villages and villagers in a region which is in part sparsely populated and has experienced outmigration over the last years. The interviewed experts are quite aware of the challenges which are faced by the villages:

*"Now there is still a possible chance to these localities which are active to some degree, to remain vital. This is possible, but maybe it's already the question if it's not yet too late. But maybe it's a chance which has to be seized by now." (OWL3 PubLE)*

In terms of direct **outcomes**, local capacity building in the participating villages is being supported by the action as the village app potentially offers easier co-ordination between leaders of community groups and organisations in the villages, thus allowing to synthesise village activities in an easier way. The village app will furthermore allow low-threshold access to information on village activities and issues at stake for villagers, specifically for newcomers or those with limited mobility. In a similar vein, it will provide a platform for sharing information and asking for help or offering services on a day-to-day level, such as help with garden works, shopping, or other sorts of neighbourly help. Digital training courses for volunteers are organised and community centres are equipped with digital technical infrastructure, thus providing a safe and welcoming local place for villagers to get advice and help in how to use technology to improve their everyday life. The 'train the trainer' approach is a promising sustainable impact of the action, specifically supporting villagers with low capability to access and use information and communication technologies, thus promoting digital inclusion.

The potential outcomes of the project at the village level are thus promising (at the time of this report the implementation is just under way). For the participating villages, the action is likely to have an impact in terms of improving living conditions, specifically for elderly and immobile population. It is also quite likely that the action strengthens the relative attractiveness of the village for newcomers, compared to neighbouring villages. We have repeatedly discussed in this report, that an active local village community (in real life) which enables the set-up of a complementary virtual village platform, is not available everywhere. Located in close distance to the model project localities, there are villages which would not be able to raise a similar level of voluntary commitment. A complementary strategy is thus needed for the digital inclusion of these villages in order not to create new

or widen the existing inequalities. In terms of distributive justice, one thus needs to discuss the relationship between relative and absolute changes due to the action's impact on different levels, within the district, but also beyond. Promoting active and committed villages in the digital transformation process strengthens their relative position, but should not be achieved at the expense of others villages in the district. The digital inclusion of villages, and specifically those in greatest need of support, is not a technical, but a deeply social process which calls for supporting infrastructure and joint efforts in order to help rural local communities using digital technical infrastructure and tools for local development. If the *SCS* project approach is becoming mainstreamed in regional politics, it is likely to improve the relative position of participating villages, and eventually the region Ost-westfalen-Lippe as a whole as an attractive place to live and work. Yet, it will need more structural changes still in order to diminish the urban-rural gap in absolute terms.



## 6. Conclusions

### What is being achieved in terms of delivering greater spatial justice?

The action *Smart Country Side* is focused on mostly rural areas of the two administrative Höxter and Lippe in Ostwestfalen-Lippe and is, as result of a participative bottom-up approach, strongly citizen-oriented. By means of offering digital tools and applications for local societal challenges, the project tries to tackle questions of spatial injustice occurring in rural localities. The achievement of the action can be discussed along different perspectives. Firstly, *SCS* concerns digitalisation and the role it plays for villages or rural areas. As a second aspect, we discuss the role of place-based development and bottom-up engagement.

Digitalisation is an important issue for future developments of regions and municipalities. For rural and sparsely populated rural areas in Germany, digitalisation is discussed as a concept promoting equal living conditions, compensating for the low density of rural areas (e-health, e-government) and further developing the potentials of rural life. At the same time, specifically in hard-to-reach regions in which the hoped-for advantages of digitalisation should have these effects, the infrastructural prerequisites in terms of broadband coverage are not yet sufficiently available in Germany. In contrast to the UK or Northern European countries, there are likewise no strategies for the digital inclusion of citizens in sparsely populated regions so far. Within this framework, the investigated project tries to foster a digital transformation process in the 16 participating villages in Höxter and Lippe. The action is innovative in several aspects: it is one of few projects in the national context, which pays attention and puts effort in explaining the benefits of digitalisation to local communities. Additionally, it explores the effects of digital tools on strengthening civic engagement and quality of life in the participating villages. Interviewed local stakeholders viewed the project as an important step to keep their villages 'alive'. Consequently, the action tries to diminish an ongoing rural-urban divide.

As argued above (see Dimension B), active participation and involvement of local communities and social groups in policy development has a not very strong tradition in Germany. In the short time of project duration, the action has integrated bottom-up engagement into its approach as best as possible. The project pursued its objectives with a modular concept. Village conferences in the participating villages were held to identify and create own local digital solutions and content, which will be merged in a district-wide digital village platform. Furthermore, 'digital village experts' have been qualified in training courses and local community centres have been facilitated with IT media centres.

In village conferences, locals were listened to and could raise their concerns about specific problems they are exposed to. One key success factor of *SCS* was the participative bottom-up approach, in which local communities and villagers were able to identify and create individual solutions and content for their 'village app'. In contrast to previous community development processes, *SCS* quickly provided tangible outputs by equipping community centres with digital technical infrastructure, thereby achieving a to some extent higher level of distributive justice. The qualification of 'digital village experts' by means of training courses supplied local volunteers with digital know-how, which they can pass on to their local communities after the project has ended. This visibility helped to conserve the project's momentum and prevent local 'fatigue' caused by a lack of progress regarding the 'village app' implementation. By the logic of 'train the trainer', the project also accomplished a certain level of sustainability, while the projects' consequential costs are not yet fully clarified.

We have discussed above (see Dimension C) the need for a complementary strategy for the digital inclusion of those villages, which lack active citizenship. In terms of spatial justice, and in the context of larger theoretical discussions, the question can be raised, if competition (in application for funds) and reliance on voluntary engagement (as a non-ubiquitous resource) can ever create more spatial justice? The digital divide between participating and non-participating villages in the districts Höxter and Lippe could even be deepened by the project. Moreover, the chosen procedure raised a kind of intra-regional competition between the different localities. But even if each village would have been able to participate, it is still obvious that the high level of local resources is not ubiquitously available in all villages. Hence, there is a need for further and complementary transfer strategies for a digital inclusion of all villages.

### **What are the policy changes ahead for bigger impact?**

The biggest policy changes ahead are to move beyond the stage of a model project, learn from *SCS* experiences and use this knowledge to mainstream practices which have proven to be successful. Through its place-based and community-oriented development approach, *Smart Country Side* raised a considerable amount of local social capital which could not have been raised by conventional administrative development projects and procedures. This backs arguments for a general shift of responsibilities to the local level and a stronger support to build and develop capacity at the lowest level of local communities. Nevertheless, such local commitment has to be coordinated and supported to some extent by an overhead structure. In the case of the *SCS* project, it was suggested in the interviews that coordination and translocal networking should be sustained by a professional contact person within the public administration.

A favourable condition for mainstreaming successful practices is given by the fact that, as part of a regional strategic programme, *Smart Country Side* is embedded in a regional digital transformation process which will be furthered by subsequent developments like the REGIONALE 2022. Thus, there is an established regional body already in place, where different stakeholders can connect with each other to address digital transformation challenges in a joint effort. This political and strategic framework provides a good forum to discuss the digital participation and inclusion strategy for Ostwestfalen-Lippe, going beyond broadband coverage (the 'hardware') and focus on digital participation support for the rural areas. This needs to go along with district-wide digital inclusion strategies, in order to sustain the triggered developments.

With regards to EU funding, national as well as EU development and funding schemes have been used and integrated quite effectively within the project. Repeatedly, while it was mentioned that community development would not be possible without external funding, rules, regulations and procedures need to be revised out of a bottom-up perspective to facilitate their implementation for local communities. Public intermediaries have a role in channelling the funds and making their use available to local communities.

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## 8. Annexes

### 8.1 List of Interviewed Experts

List of interviewed experts	Date of interview	Type of expert
OWL1 PubLI	2018-05-02	Local public actor
OWL2 PubLI	2018-05-14	Local public actor
OWL3 PubLE	2018-07-09	Local public actor
OWL4 PubLI	2018-07-10	Local public actor
OWL5 MedLE	2018-07-10	Local media
OWL6 PubLE	2018-07-10	Local public actor
OWL7 PubRE	2018-07-10	Regional public actor
OWL8 PubLE	2018-07-10	Local public actor
OWL9 PubLE	2018-07-10	Local public actor
OWL10 PubLE	2018-07-10	Local public actor
OWL11 PubRE	2018-07-24	Regional public actor
OWL12 PubLE	2018-07-24	Local public actor
OWL13 PubLE	2018-07-25	Local public actor
OWL14 PubLE	2018-07-25	Local public actor
OWL15 CivLE	2018-07-25	Local civic actor
OWL16 CivLE	2018-07-25	Local civic actor
OWL17 PubRE	2018-07-03	Regional public actor
OWL18 CivVI	2018-09-11	Village-level civic actor
OWL19 CivVI	2018-09-11	Village-level civic actor
OWL20 PubLE	2018-09-12	Local public actor
OWL21 CivVI	2018-09-12	Village-level civic actor
OWL22 CivVI	2018-09-12	Village-level civic actor
OWL23 CivVI	2018-09-12	Village-level civic actor
OWL24 CivVI	2018-09-17	Village-level civic actor
OWL25 CivVI	2018-09-17	Village-level civic actor
OWL26 CivVI	2018-09-17	Village-level civic actor
OWL27 CivVI	2018-09-17	Village-level civic actor
OWL28 CivVI	2018-09-17	Village-level civic actor
OWL29 CivRE	2018-09-18	Regional civic actor
OWL30 CivVI	2018-09-18	Village-level civic actor
OWL31 CivVI	2018-09-19	Village-level civic actor
OWL32 CivVI	2018-09-19	Village-level civic actor
OWL33 CivVI	2018-09-19	Village-level civic actor
OWL34 CivVI	2018-09-19	Village-level civic actor
OWL35 PubRE	2018-10-01	Regional public actor
OWL36 PubRE	2018-11-14	Regional public actor

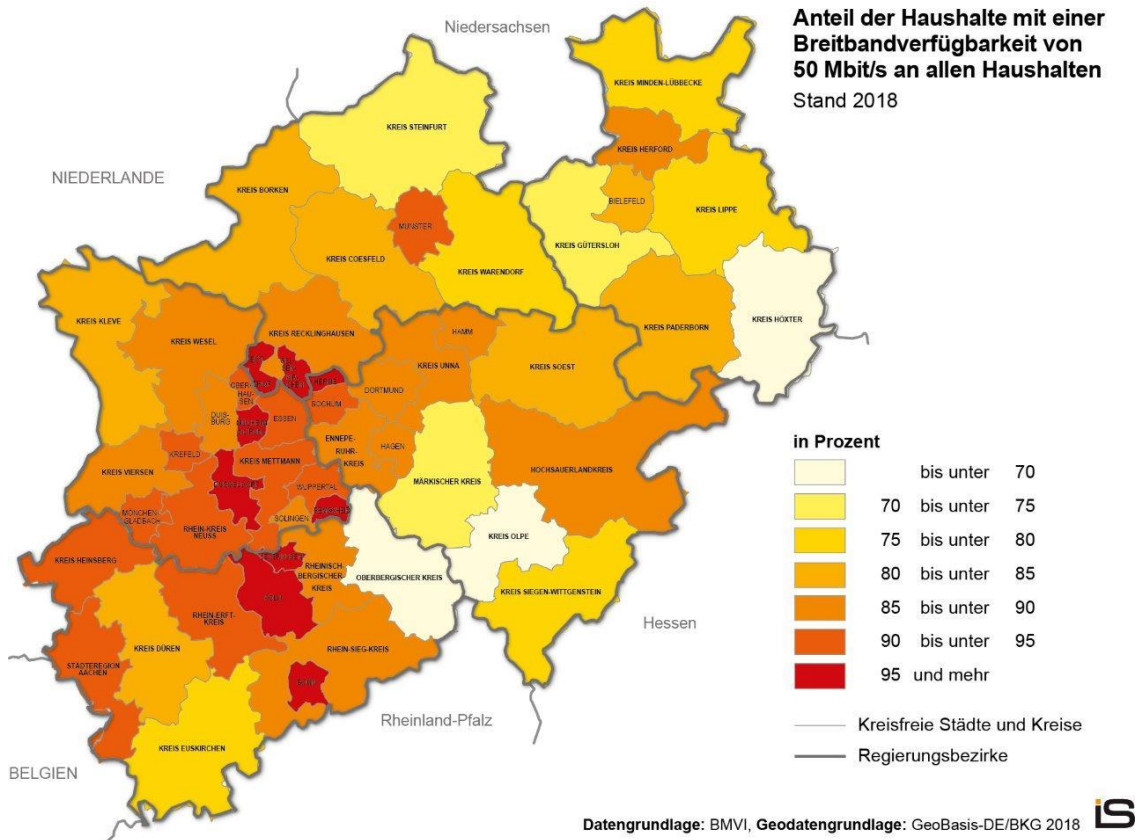
List of focus groups, meetings, & events	Abbr.	Date	Number of participants
Village Conference Lipperreihe	FG1	2018-03-19	60
Meeting of the political advisory board	FG2	2018-04-18	15
Village Conference Brakelsiek	FG3	2018-05-24	40
Focus group with project team	FG4	2018-12-14	6



## 8.2 Stakeholder Interaction Table

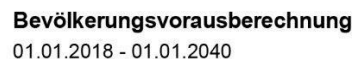
Type of Stakeholders	Most relevant 'territorial' level they operate at	Stakeholders' ways of involvement in the project (What do we gain, what do they gain)
Project team	Local (administrative district)	Interviews, focus group, & events: Insights into history, contents, and coordination of the action; motivation and goals; information on participating villages; discussion of possible future challenges; communication and relationship to administration and politics
Project developer	Below local (villages)	Interviews & events: Motivation to participate; information on activities within the village; communication with project team and other participating villages; discussion of factors for development of the region; discussion of civil society responsibilities
Local politicians	Local (administrative district)	Interviews & events: History of the action; insights into governance processes; (critical) opinions on the action; place-based knowledge about local context (identification of disadvantaged areas); development and challenges of the region
Local administration	Local (administrative district)	Interviews: Insights in governance processes; comprehension of practical realisation of political activities; history of the action; importance of civil society for the region; general strategy for future development of the district; evaluation of bottom-up processes
Local development projects	Local (administrative district) Below local (part of administrative district)	Interviews & events: Cooperation with and perspective on the action; challenges of EU funding and suggestions for improvement; discussion of strengths, weaknesses, and future challenges for the region
Regional development agency	Beyond local (governmental district)	Interviews: Strategic governance of single projects in the overall regional development frame; possibilities and forums for communication between project coordinators; challenges of EU funding programs
Regional and national state offices/representations	Beyond local (state and country)	Interviews: Role of the action beyond local; development of the region; the region in a wider regional and national context; opportunities for political measures to strengthen region
Non-profit/civil society organisations	Beyond local (governmental district) Local (administrative district)	Interviews & events: Cooperation with the action; discussion of development of the region; discussion of role and form of civil society in the region; future challenges for the region
Educational institution	Local (administrative district)	Interviews: Cooperation with and execution of the action; strengths and weaknesses of the action; discussion of the role of civil engagement in the region
Media	Local (administrative district)	Interviews: Cooperation with the action; evaluation of the action and future challenges for the district; discussion of the economic and technological structure of the district
Academics/Scientists	Beyond local (region)	Focus group: Exchange of information and observations

### 8.3 Map(s) and Photos



**Map 3:** Rates of households with an available broad band capacity of at least 50 Mbit/s in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2018 (Source: ILS)

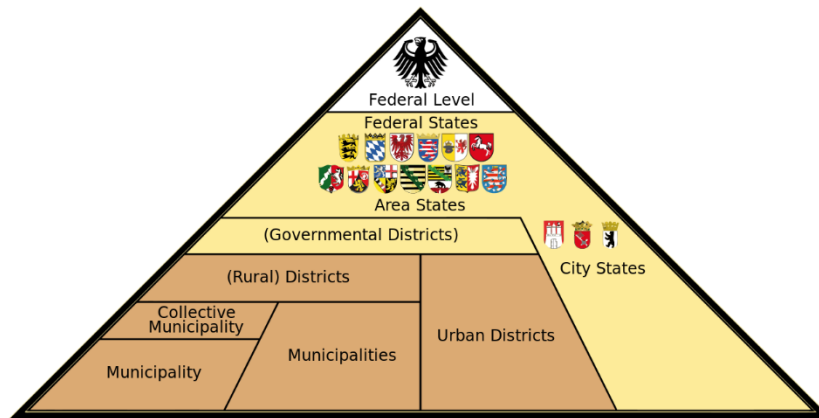
The district Höxter has the most insufficient broad band supply in North Rhine-Westphalia. Below 70 per cent of the households are provided with data download rates of 50 Mbit/s. The situation in Lippe looks a little bit better. Up to 80 % of the households can achieve high speed internet connections of 50 Mbit/s or more. However, the map only shows availability of broad band access. Annual reports of the Federal Network Agency are showing that only 70 per cent of users are achieving half of their maximum data transfer rates for downloads as contracted. Just 12 per cent of users are generating maximum data transfer rates or even exceeding contracted connection speeds (Bundesnetzagentur, 2019, p. 10).



## 8.4 Additional information

### Governance Structures of Germany

The graph below shows the German vertical governance structures. Höxter and Lippe are classified as rural or administrative districts. They belong to the governmental district Detmold and the federal state of North Rhine-Westfalia.



**Figure 4:** Administrative structures of Germany (source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), Fred the Oyster).

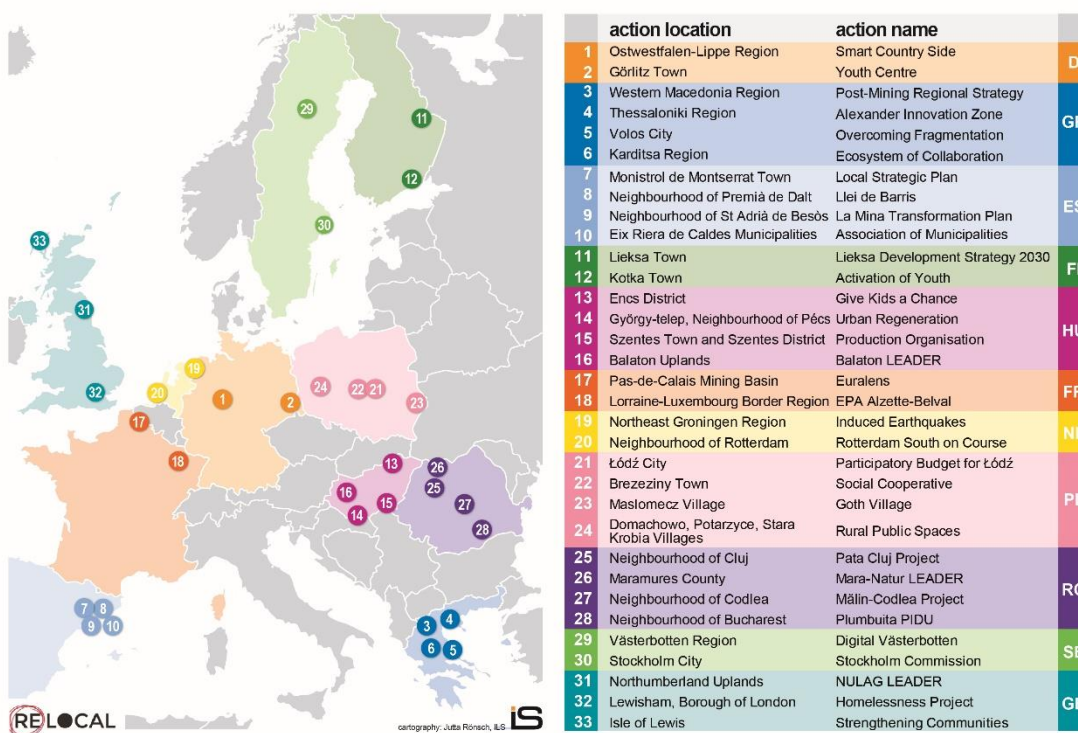
In Germany, the administrative structure builds on federalism. Hence, states have relatively high autonomy towards the federal level and certain tasks such as the field of education mainly lay in their legislative autonomy. Governmental districts as administrative structures play a rather small role, while (rural) districts and municipalities together form the local self-government. The former mainly fulfils an administrative function, providing public transport, waste management, civil protection, health services and more. Municipalities are the lowest level of local self-government and responsible for both public as well as voluntary services (for instance cultural institutions and activities). The autonomy of municipalities to provide services depends to a large extent on their financial capacities, which are based on their tax income and allocation of funds by the state and federal level. Consequently, municipalities with low population numbers usually face more financial constraints than those with a high number of (financially strong) inhabitants.

## The RELOCAL Project

EU Horizon 2020 research project '**Resituating the local in cohesion and territorial development**' –**RELOCAL** aims to identify factors that condition local accessibility of European policies, local abilities to articulate needs and equality claims and local capacities for exploiting European opportunity structures.

In the past, especially since the economic and financial crisis, the European Social Model has proven to be challenged by the emergence of spatially unjust results. The RELOCAL hypothesis is that **processes of localisation and place-based public policy** can make a positive contribution to spatial justice and democratic empowerment.

The research is based on **33 case studies** in **13 different European** countries that exemplify development challenges in terms of spatial justice. The cases were chosen to allow for a balanced representation of different institutional contexts. Based on case study findings, project partners will draw out the factors that influence the impact of place-based approaches or actions from a comparative perspective. The results are intended to facilitate a greater local orientation of cohesion, territorial development and other EU policies.



The RELOCAL project runs from October 2016 until September 2020.

Read more at <https://relocal.eu>

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