

Learning from Brandenburg: Challenging the Status quo through Social Innovation

On 08 June 2017 the members of the SOCENT SPAs working group took off to a two-day site visit through some of Brandenburg's most sparsely populated territories, *Barnim* and *Uckermark*. Averaging at a mere 39 inhabitants per square kilometre and a relatively high unemployment rate of 12.2%, which doubles the German overall average of ca. 6%, the *Uckermark* in particular showcases how sparsely populated and remote rural areas are increasingly challenged by demographic (upward) shifts and the associated effects on basic infrastructure supply and social cohesion.

On the other hand, both *Barnim* and the *Uckermark* are also home to a bonanza of initiatives that work towards improving their local situation and make the case for the potential of social innovation to generate change and perspectives where other approaches have not yet lived up to their expectations.

In the course of our study trip we learned

- how freedom to experiment may constitute a crucial component for creating social and lasting innovation;
- that the interregional transfer of ideas and concepts can lead to enhanced employment opportunities and reducing the labour demand/supply mismatch; and
- that the perseverance of dedicated and determined individuals as well as a deep understanding for their local ecosystem and the potentials associated therewith lie at the core of transforming community life and social change.

08.06.2017: Social Entrepreneurship in Germany & Brandenburg – An introduction

The study visit started with an intense session on social entrepreneurship and social innovation in Germany. At their Berlin Lab **Social Impact**'s Thorsten Jahnke and Florian Birk presented on the current state of affairs and trends concerning sector-related issues as well as on Social Impact's own efforts to promote social entrepreneurship not only in their eight labs across Germany but also de-centrally all over Brandenburg. This introduction was followed and comprehensively amended by Mr. Jörg Jurkeit from Brandenburg's **Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs, Health, Women and Family (MSGF)**, who provided profound insights into the Ministry's strategy and current efforts related to social entrepreneurship. Finally, Dr. Tobias Federwisch (**Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)**), a researcher on the project "Innovations in Rural Municipalities. Conditions, Actors and Processes of Creative Community Development", provided for a very applied view on the current state of social innovation research in Germany and beyond.



Social Innovation in Brandenburg

After a one-hour ride to Biesenthal, the project group enjoyed **Lobetaler Bio**'s home-made produce during a lunch at the organisation's Milchladen. Thomas Keller, Managing Director of the **Hoffnungstaler Stiftung Lobetal**, the umbrella organisation managing the operations of the dairy producing enterprise, then introduced the project group to what it takes to set up and continuously develop a successful and socially inclusive production company of organic and innovative dairy products. Of special concern was the issue of external sources of finance as social enterprises continue to face extra thresholds to fund their operations and/or

further develop their service portfolio given the frequent limitations on profits and often hybrid organizational structures.

Altkünkendorf: A Case for Citizen Engagement

Altkünkendorf, a village of 160, lies beautifully embedded in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage Forest Buchenwald-Grumsin. With a remarkable 25 volunteers active in operating and further developing the village's project to become the go-to education and tourist centre for the area Altkünkendorf has managed to not only maintain its population stock but to further increase the demand for living space in their community. This is



particularly remarkable as many of the surrounding communities continue to be plagued by an aging population and a lack of anchor tenants to attract new community members. To learn more about the region's difficult situation and to find out how Altkünkendorf successfully challenged the region's status quo the project participants met up with the village's mayor **Mr. Hans-Jürgen Bewer**, **Ms. Monika Stürmann**, Local Advisory Committee, as well as the major of the district capital Angermünde, **Mr. Frederik Bewer**. Here, we learned about the importance of individual engagement and the need for



social innovations to be embedded in their communities. The project's solutions have been driven by a clear vision, perseverance, determination and persuasiveness to capitalize on the community's unique selling point (USP) (i.e. the stunningly beautiful forest area surrounding Altkünkendorf) and to create a sense of ownership among the community members to bring about social and lasting change.

09.06.2017: Public Sector and Social Innovation

Of its 122.000 only 90.000 are projected to remain in the sparsely populated district of Schwedt, which lies in the north-eastern part of Brandenburg, by 2030. With an unemployment rate averaging at 12% (and a youth unemployment rate reaching a staggering 10% (national average: 4.8%)) the district faces significant challenges concerning the integration of large parts of its population into the labour market. A best practice and an example for successful interregional knowledge transfer, Schwedt's **MUG. e.V.** is working towards qualifying and integrating long-term unemployed people into the region's first labour market. The initiative was jointly developed and funded by the local public employment service ("Jobcenter") and the Agency for Local and Economic Development and Tourism. On the morning of the visit's second day, the study group was introduced to the MUG's system which is based on an Austrian best practice and uses a dense network to public and private sector employers as well as individual counselling services to provide their clients with social support and real work experience to slowly grow their skill set and capitalize on their potentials.

Drivers of Social Innovation

Besides experiencing first-hand how to create employment opportunities in a difficult environment, the site visit participants went on to study how the provision of (alternative) education infrastructure constitutes a vital element for community development. **Zuckermarck e.V.** is an education initiative based on an open-minded pedagogical concept and de facto compulsory parent involvement. The project is located in the village



of Wallmow, a small, populous and dynamic town, which, however, is embedded in a wider area afflicted by rural exodus. **Heike Reinhold, Mandy Möhwald** and **Jana Franke-Frey** of Zuckermarck e.V. explained to us how Wallmow differs from its regional counterparts and that freedom to experiment constituted a crucial element for their social innovation to thrive. An increasing amount of legislation, state and budget control, on the other hand, has been perceived both a threshold for further development and an impulse to find creative and thus innovative solutions along the way.

On our last stop in Hennigsdorf the group visited **Vivian Böllersen** of the **Ökonauten eG**, a co-operative dedicated to stop land grabbing efforts in Brandenburg by buying agricultural land and developing it ecologically. The co-operative also provides a dense network for young farmers - like Ms. Böllersen herself - willing and able to cultivate agricultural land in a more sustainable way. Thus, community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives such as Ökonauten eG, provide for an alternative support mechanism for people willing to settle in rural areas and to sustainably develop local farm land.

Participants:

- Mr. Jörg Jurkeit (MASGF)
- Mr. Tobias Federwisch (IRS)
- Florian Birk (Social Impact)
- Hendrik Peters (Social Impact)
- Ana Gomez (Cives Mundi)
- Marlene Kohllechner-Autto (MTI/LUAS)
- Anu Harju-Myllyaho (MTI/LUAS)
- Blanca Moreton Bombin (Junta de Castilla y Leon)
- Eva Havelková (EPIC)

