Workshop Review

Strenthening village centers using the Smart Village approach in Styria

24.05.2023, Gleisdorf, Styria

Participants: 40 representatives of the Styrian LEADER Local Action Groups and Regionalmanagement organisations, representatives from the Styrian federal administration.

Context: Styria is one of nine federal provinces in Austria. Currently, there is a strong development focus on strengthening village centers, in the sense of counteracting the dynamics of local functions moving from the centers to the border areas and the consequences of vacant buildings, lack of frequency etc. Hence the department for provincial and regional development elaborated a multi-level approach on center development, including EU-instruments and concepts (especially Smart Villages), provincial funding and support as well as relying on the support of regional development organisations (mainly LAGs and Regionalmanagements). LEADER and Regionalmanagements are both development institutions in Styria. Regionalmanagements are working on much larger territories and are based on Styrian what makes them connected more closely to the public sphere whereas LEADER is based on EU-regulations and are working bottom-up. There is a close interrelation between these two structures which, when aligned, often leads to mutual amplification.

In its core, the Styrian approach on village center development contains the position of a *village center coordinator*, who is employed by the federal administration to support local development processes.

The aim of this event was to present and discuss the systematics and procedure of smart village as an approach for village center development in Styria, to inform about funding opportunities and to plan the next steps on regional and state level. The participating representatives from LEADER and Regionalmanagement organisations got the opportunity to discuss their roles in the multilevel governance system.

Dramaturgy: The workshop was split into two main parts. The initial part was devoted to background information on Smart Villages and village center development. It started off with a presentation by the AT SR27 Expert, Michael Fischer, about the Smart Village concept (see PPT). Besides general information about the EU-Smart Village Approach and the EU Pilot projects, he tried to provide a definition of "smart" development by framing it as a process that covers several specificities like participation, strategic approach, digitalisation, etc. He argued that each of those characteristics itself can show a broad variation, like a "continuum", that does not strictly demarcate "smart" and "non smart" but rather shows development opportunities for local communities in different development pathways.

Christian Rosenwirth from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Watermanagement in his function as managing authority for LEADER and Smart Villages, presented an overview of the four interventions that are foreseen to implement Smart Villages in the AT CAP-Strategic Plan for the period 2023-2027. He emphasised Smart Village as a useful concept that amends existing approaches with the local, integrated and strategic focus. He also pointed out that LEADER and Regionalmanagements are key in delivering Smart Villages because of their knowledge and networks.

Together with several representatives from LEADER and Regionalmanagements and colleagues from the Styrian administration, the village center coordinator explained the new support model for village center development. This model itself can be considered as "smart governance" since it on the one hand tries to support delivery partners vertically (LAGs, Regionalmanagements, municipalities) as well as coordinates horizontally between different public departments, which all play an important role in village center development. (this model is further described in a separate document).

In the afternoon participants were invited to work on three different aspects in the context of Smart Village and village center development.

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1. Local smart solutions

Q1: Which topics and challenges at the local level will be in focus in the future? / Q2: Which innovative project contents/solutions are already planned/foreseeable?

This first round already unveiled several interesting local approaches. Amongst others the following clusters of initiatives were mentioned as planned or currently implemented:

- o Different solutions utilizing vacant buildings in village centers: libraries, coworking, groceries,
- o climate friendly childcare infrastructure
- o social aspects of mobility
- o quality development in villages to make them more attractive for relocating the place of residence
- o establishing "site managers" for promoting and brokering vacant buildings
- o housing opportunities for young people

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2. Smart support through regional development

Q3: How can regional development (LEADER/ Regionalmanagement) proceed to manage and implement "smart" village center strengthening processes in the region?

- o LAGs and Regionalmanagements consider themselves as hubs and nodes, vertically between local initiatives, the Styrian administration and national funding instruments; they can act as "first stop shops" for local initiatives
- o They are able to introduce new and innovative processes and instruments
- o They can facilitate development processes
- o They can network horizontally between the local initiatives (know-how-transfer).
- o Regions provide a testbed function for experimenting with new approaches

Requirements: qualification of LAG and Regionalmanagement personnel, common understanding of processes and development qualities

Q4: What kind of stakeholder participation should be offered for this in the region in the future?

- o Participation should always be connected to the regional (LAG/ Regionalmanagement) level
- o Expectations should be very clear from the beginning – that requires sensitive but clear communication
- o Introduction of new participation methods might be a success factor
- o Focussed participation (towards a clearly defined goal);
- o Processes should be tailored to specific target groups (no "one size fits all" processes).

o Results should be implementable. That does not mean stand-alone measures but rather a connected village strategy with a clear implementation focus

Q5: What is the role of digitalization and how can its potential be harnessed?

o Although village center development is considered more as an "analogue" process, digitalisation can be seen as an instrument and as a basis for discussion and decision making: this means processing of relevant data on local heat hotspots, climate, population development, mobility behaviour; existing data should be made accessible and usable
o Installation of a cadastre on vacant buildings and vacant land
o Digitalisation as an instrument for gaining transparency on processes and supporting clear communication
o But: all in all it seems that imaginations of an added value of digitalisation seems quite vague and needs further inspiration ➔ inputs from SR21 and SR27 might be useful

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3. Smart Governance

Q6: What framework do regions need (cooperation municipality - LAG - regional management - state services)?

Concerns/ structural challenges:

o the role of LAGs and Regionalmanagements need to be clarified in order to manage expectations properly;
o LAGs and Regionalmanagements need to be coordinated in the regions;
o there is a need for coordination with existing structures like business location managements, city managements, etc.

Necessary tools/ necessary support:

o regular internal exchange formats (Federal administration <-> LAGs/Regionalmanagements; LAGs <-> Regionalmanagements; municipalities <-> LAGs/Regionalmanagements)
o exchanging experiences and information about good practices (databases, interactive maps, etc.)
o additional budget for implementation activities
o common strategy/common answers for burning questions like "how to deal with decisions that weaken municipal centers" , "who is eligible for support for center development", "what is the regional dimension of municipal center development", etc…
o a common vision about a target vision, e.g. a guideline for "strong centers"
o manuals and minimum requirements for integrated development strategies
o approaches to sensitize for the importance of strategic development
o it needs a "care taker" at regional level because it is easier to finance there compared to the local level
o necessary topics that need to be covered: local supply, mobility, climate change.
o Skills development for LAGs/Regionalmanagments/care takers (like an academy, etc.), including peer-learning

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