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PARTNERSHIPS AND NEW RURAL GOVERNANCE FOR REACTING TO DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN RURAL REGIONS IN GERMANY

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Abstract

Peripheral rural areas are particularly affected by demographic changes. The research question is: how the involved rural actors interact with each other to react to the resulting challenges, and why does this mode of interaction come about? The contribution presents empirical data from a survey and three case studies conducted in 2008 and 2009. The results indicate the coincidence of cooperation and unilateral action. Regional partnership is limited and every actor first tries to solve his problems by himself, and where necessary with a beggar-thy-neighbour policy. Rural actors engage in cooperation most notably to acquire funding, to exchange experiences, to prepare concepts and to conduct analyses. They develop and implement their projects, however, predominantly unilaterally.

Keywords

Rural governance, rural development, regional cooperation, actor-centred institutionalism

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Introduction

A low total fertility rate and increasing life expectancy have characterised Germany for more than four decades (Swiaczny et al., 2008). This demographic change causes a spatial spread and long-term population decline and ageing. The recent decrease of the immigration accelerates this process. The resulting challenges include the closing-down of services of general interest, residential vacancy, urban decline, labour force shortage, changing economic demand and negative fiscal effects. Peripheral rural areas are particularly affected by demographic changes (BBSR, 2009; Müller and Siedentop, 2004). Here, economic problems induce out-migration of mainly young people. The intensity of population ageing and decline, as well as the need for action, is thus higher in these areas. The closing-down of public services cannot be compensated as in urban centres by using neighbouring facilities. Because of the low population density, the costs of providing public services are relatively high and the limits of economic sustainability have already been reached today (Ladd, 1992; Smailes et al., 2002). Scholars and regional actors fear a vicious circle of population ageing and shrinkage, further decline in the provision of public services and employment opportunities, which in turn leads to further out-migration (Beirat für Raumordnung, 2005: 2, Henkel 2004: 346-348). Therefore, demographic change threatens the territorial cohesion in Germany, as well as in Europe, where many peripheral rural areas face similar processes.

Regional and rural development policies support regional partnerships in order to offer a financial and organisational framework for reacting to these challenges. These policies intend to coordinate the measures of the local actors and to adapt the actions of the involved stakeholders by deliberate processes. Regional partnership here means here a multi-sectoral and non agricultural policy approach, mainly bottom-up, by the regions for the regions (Bachtler, 2001; Shucksmith, 2009). This definition is in accordance with developments in practice (Leader, Integrated Rural Development etc.) and in the theoretical debate (endogenous development, collaborative planning, regional governance etc.) since the 1980s (Benz et al., 2000; Diller, 2001; Löb, 2006).

There has already been an extensive discussion particularly about demographic change in German geography, rural, urban and regional studies, as well as in urban and regional planning (Gans

and Schmitz-Veltin, 2006; Kujath and Schmidt, 2007; Sedlacek, 2007; Wirth and Bose, 2007). Even though the spatial characteristics and impacts of ageing and shrinking are rather well researched, we know very little about how the demographic change influences rural policy, politics and polity. To fill a part of this research gap, the question of this article is: how do the rural actors involved interact with each other to react to demographic change, and why does this mode of interaction come about? The possible modes of interaction build a dichotomy of cooperation and unilateral action. This means that demographic change can, on the one hand, intensify partnerships among regional actors dealing collaboratively with the problems or, on the other, the actors can compete against each other for the fewer (young) inhabitants and public funding.

To answer the research question, the next section presents the theoretical background about the modes of interaction in rural governance and demographic change. This current state of research guides the data collection and interpretation. The following chapter introduces the research design and the methods applied. Then the results of the survey are outlined. The next chapter integrates the findings of three case studies in the conceptual framework of the actor-centred institutionalism¹. The final section of the paper sums up the results referring to the initial question.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background of the paper is based on rural, regional and political studies. Firstly, the discussion about rural and regional governance focuses on different institutional structures (Böcher, 2008; Edwards et al., 2001; Jones and Little, 2000; MacKinnon, 2002). This includes informal regional working groups, formalised intercommunal cooperations or rural districts which are dealing with rural development. The basic assumption is that the mode of governance changes from hierarchical steering of state actors to regional partnerships where public actors cooperate with a wide range of private and civic actors. This network governance emphasizes reciprocal information, coordination and collaboration. These networks are both horizontal in the regions and vertical among different political tiers from the municipality, over the rural district to the German states and the federal level up to the European Union.

The second related theoretical approach is (neo-) endogenous development (Hahne, 1985; Ray, 2006; Shucksmith, 2009). This approach implies that regional actors identify and use specific potentials of their region. Although endogenous development is seen as a bottom-up process, superordinate levels are important for enabling regional and local actors. The objectives and measures are developed in the regions and the development targets a broad improvement in quality of life and not only economic production or income.

The study is, thirdly, based on regional research about demographic change mentioned in the introduction. For the last quarter of the 20th century, the traditional engagement of rural studies with net-outmigration has turned to in-migration, repopulation and counter urbanisation particularly in British and American research (Milbourne, 2007: 381). In Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, the perspective is different because many rural areas face population decline and ageing. In scientific debates, often policy implications are derived how to respond to demographic change. This includes suggestions about the way regional actors should interact.

Altogether, theoretical discussions highlight a dichotomy of possible modes of interaction caused by demographic change: acting unilaterally or coordinating activities by bargaining and cooperating in partnerships. In scientific debates about population decline and ageing, there seems to be a consensus

that demographic change induces an increasing cooperation requirement (e.g., Beier, 2004: 118; Winkel 2005: 22-23). Beside the key words often used to justify regional co-operations such as connecting key actors, using synergies or pooling resources (Danson et al., 2000: 268), the context of demographic change gives some new reasons making this recommendation plausible. Intraregional specialisation can enhance economic sustainability of infrastructures and regionally coordinated deconstruction helps to maintain locations with optimized accessibility for all. Furthermore, the concentration of know-how and finances can create and implement new organisational solutions like mobile and flexible infrastructures. Finally, the hope exists that regional cooperation avoids cutthroat competition between the municipalities to attract persons, enterprises and public revenues. Winkel (2005: 23) even regards regional cooperation as the main approach responding to demographic change in peripheral rural areas.

Political science theories about bargaining systems (Benz, Scharpf and Zintl, 1992) and veto-players (Tsebelis, 2002), however, limit these expectations. The first problem concerns the bargaining dilemma. A commitment in the welfare optimum presupposes an open discussion about the real goals and interests of the participants. The dilemma emerges because, if someone follows this expectation, he takes the risk to be overreached by the others. The veto-player theory indicates that the divergence of a commitment from the status quo decreases with the number of involved veto-players and the heterogeneity among them. The informal regional institutions in rural development require mostly a consensus among many partners. These partners are not only part of different societal subsystems but have also divergent interests and capabilities because of different action situations including demographic developments, available resources or endowment with infrastructure and service facilities.

In addition to the theoretical arguments, empirical studies in particular from Germany show that regional cooperation evokes high transaction costs due to its voluntary basis and the need for consensual decisions (ARL, 1998; Diller, 2001). The policy results are often characterised by a lack of innovation and remain restricted to soft effects such as learning, trust and network-building. The requirement of win-win-constellations entails avoiding controversial topics. The problem particularly concerns location decisions such as the development of residence sites or visible and frequently used services (e.g., the closing down of schools). In other sectors, cooperations have already existed for a long time (technical infrastructure, public transport etc.). Furthermore, cooperations are restricted since regional actors fear the loss of autonomy and are often at odds with each other for a long time. Finally, there are some indications, particularly in peripheral rural areas, that regional actors establish cooperation only to meet the funding guidelines or to lobby at state/Länder level (ARL, 1998: 1; Danielzyk, 1999: 583).

In the context of population decline, regional cooperations seem to be notably difficult due to the intensifying competition for inhabitants, clients and taxpayers. This assumption is built on experiences from model regions of spatial development in Germany (Kocks, 2007) and a regional development process in the central Erz Mountains (Saxony, Germany) (Bose and Wirth, 2006).

To sum up the theoretical discussion about the modes of interactions and demographic change, scholars often expect an increase in the necessity for regional cooperation and advise this particularly for peripheral rural areas. Previous empirical findings and theoretical reflections indicate, however, the dominance of unilateral action in practice. Because there are theoretical arguments for both

collaborative and unilateral action, empirical research presented in the following can clarify to what extent they are pursued in actual rural development.

Research design and methods

The empirical part of the research is conducted in the following two steps: a cross-sectional and a case study design. „A cross-sectional design entails the collection of data on more than one case (usually quite a lot more than one) and at a single point in time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables (usually many more than two) which are then examined to detect patterns of associations” (Bryman, 2004: 41). This research design enables a broad overview over the actual state of practice concerning rural governance reactions to demographic change.

A standardised, written questionnaire was used in 2008 to collect empirical survey data (Bryman, 2004: 136-139; Dillman, 1978). The questionnaire was mailed to all regional organisations in sparsely populated, peripheral areas. These areas are characterised by a population density below 100 inhabitants per square kilometre and by a below average accessibility to the big city centres (Schürt et al., 2005). The surveyed organisations must deal with rural development as defined above. Multi-sectoral regional development initiatives, like local action groups, and rural districts (Landkreise) meet this definition. As a result of an internet and database research, 150 regional development initiatives and 78 districts were found to belong to sparsely populated, peripheral areas. In each regional organisation, one representative, a District Administrator (Landrat) or a regional manager, was asked to answer the questionnaire. The response rate was, with 113 answers, approximately 50%.

While the cross-sectional design focuses on breadth, the case study deals with rural governance reactions in greater detail. This in-depth study allows investigation of the causal processes and to identification of reasons why the observed reactions to demographic change come about. Based on the results of the survey, three informative cases were selected for a multiple case study design (Blatter et al., 2007: 123-185; Yin, 2003: 46-135).

The case selection followed the most different system design (Jahn, 2005: 64; Patton, 1990: 171-186). That means, cases with a very heterogeneous regional context were analysed to ensure that correlations observed in all three cases probably apply to all other cases and can be generalised. Furthermore, the survey should show that the selected regional organisations deal intensively with demographic change and have already implemented some measures. The willingness of the regional actors to participate in the research also played an important role.

This selection process resulted in an in-depth analysis of the initiative of Rodachtal, a cross-border initiative in the north of Bavaria and the south of Thuringia, the rural district of Stendal in the Altmark and the regional development initiative of Ostprignitz-Ruppin, northwest of Berlin, but not adjacent. Table 1 illustrates characteristics of the three cases selected to describe the context in which regional development occurs. The presented evidence stems from data collection and analysis in 2008 and 2009 that include expert interviews and documentary research (Bryman 2004, Bogner and Menz 2002). In each case, six important involved actors, such as regional managers, mayors, chief officers, representatives of rural development agencies, citizens, etc., were interviewed and development strategies, project and evaluation reports, etc., analysed.

Table 1: Characteristics of the three studied cases

	Initiative of Rodachtal	Rural district of Stendal	Regional development initiative of Ostprignitz-Ruppin
Number of inhabitants	Ca. 30,000	Ca. 127,000	Ca. 70,000
surface	448 km ²	131 267 km ²	2 509 km ² ~
Population density	68.7 inhabitants per square kilometre	53 inhabitants per square kilometre	43 inhabitants per square kilometre ~
Federal state	Bavaria and Thuringia	Saxony-Anhalt	Brandenburg
Organisational structure	Association and inter-communal cooperation	Rural district	Association
Unemployment rate 2007	7% (in the Bavarian part) and 22% (in the Thuringian part)*	21%	21% ~
Population development 1995-2005	-1.4%	-11%	-7% ~
Development of the number of children (< 15 years) 1995-2005	-10.1% ⁺	-47%	-53% ~
Development of the number of seniors (> 64 years) 1995-2005	+26.5%	+30%	+38% ~

* The figures refer to 2005.

⁺ The figures refer to the number of children and youths (< 25 years).

~ The figures refer to the whole rural district of Ostprignitz-Ruppin, while the development initiative excludes the two city centres of Neuruppin and Wittstock larger than 10 000 inhabitants.

Results of the survey

As outlined above in the theoretical debate, a tension appears between cooperation and unilateral action among regional actors. Representatives of regional organisations were asked in the questionnaire to classify the interactions in their region whether they are cooperative or competitive. Four questions give an insight into the mode of interaction; however they only represent the self-assessment of the asked persons.

Figure 1 shows the extent to which the alternative modes of interaction are applied in regional practice. As a result, the respondents stated that regional actors cooperate and coordinate their

activities totally or predominantly in almost all cases. By contrast, competition and unilateral action is seen as the dominant mode of interaction in only few regions.

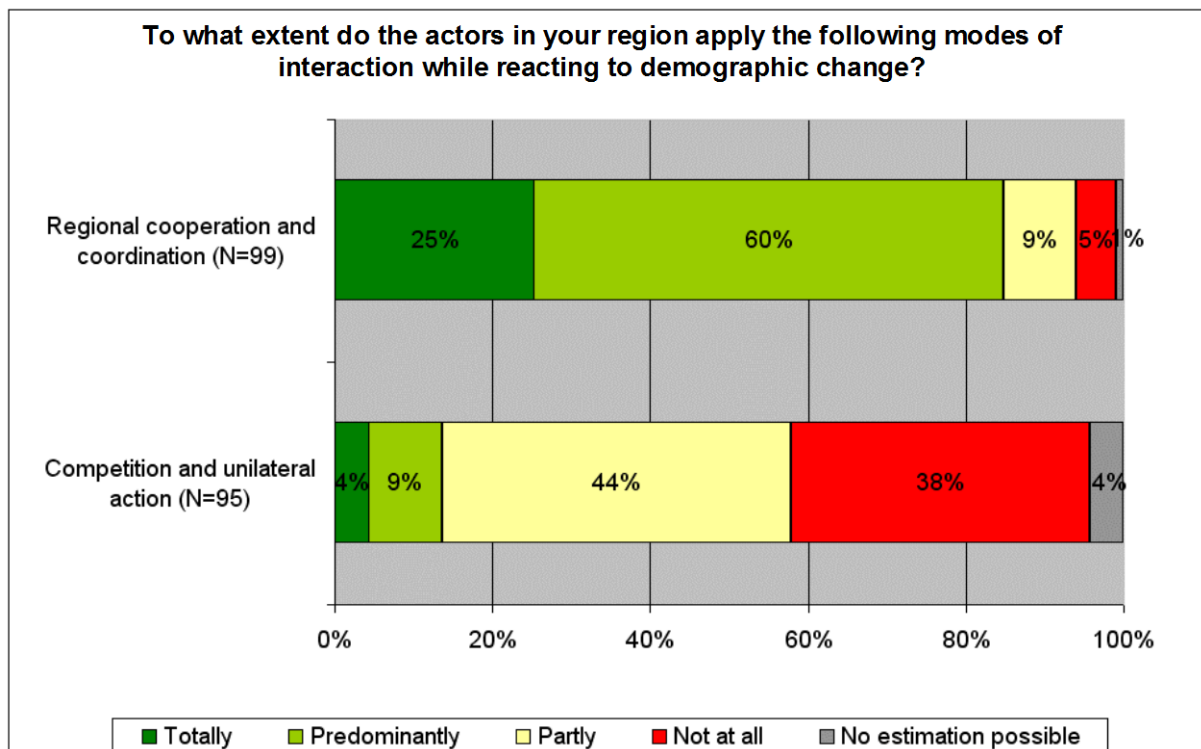


Figure 1: Mode of interaction among regional actors reacting to demographic change in peripheral rural areasⁱⁱ

The second question dealing with the mode of interaction should control these statements. The representatives were asked how their regional organisation usually decides about measures concerning demographic change (Figure 2). The most important decision-making method is majority decision in a directly elected council. This implies a decision making within institutional actors like municipalities and rural districts and not collaboratively among the regional actors. Nevertheless, more than half of the answering regional organisations build a consensus in general or the relative majority among autonomous actors is needed. These findings suggest that several partners cooperate to respond to demographic change. The difference between cooperating and unilateral action becomes even less when looking at the answers to the unstructured question about facilitating and constraining factors for reacting to demographic change. In 17 cases, cooperation and networks facilitate the regional reaction to demographic change, but insufficient cooperation and competition among regional actors was mentioned as a constraining factor 15 times, with almost the same frequency.

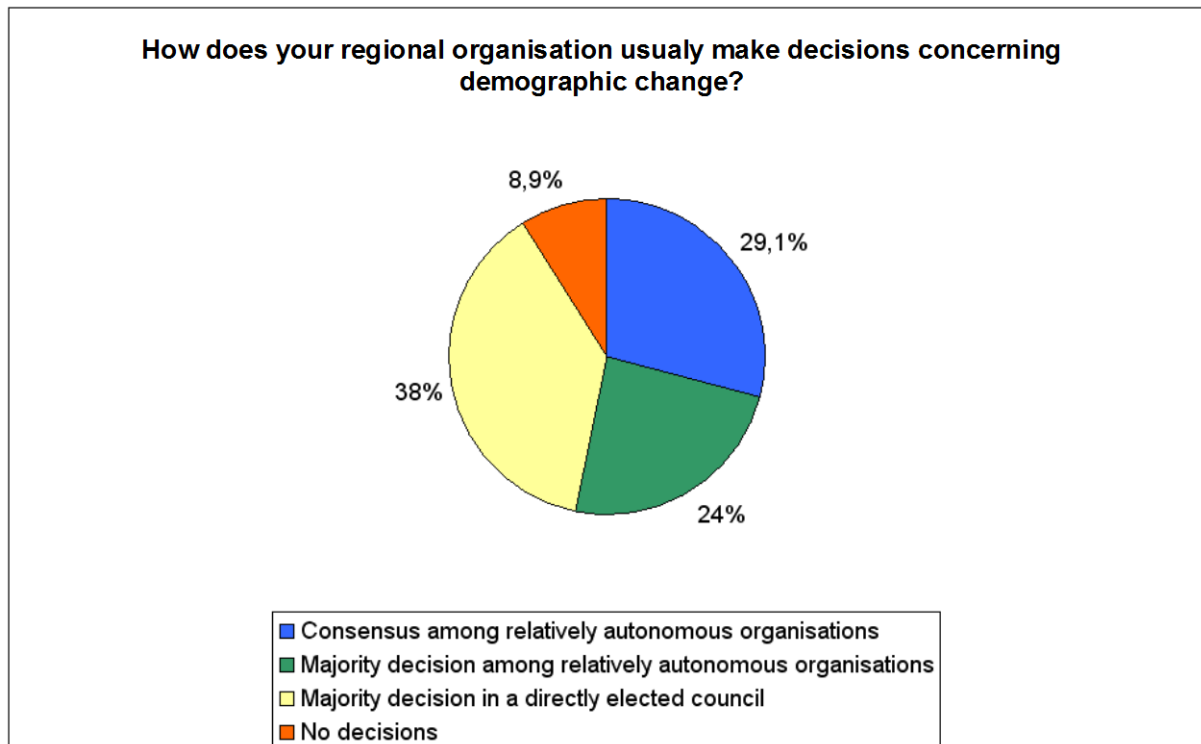


Figure 2: Usual decision-making method of the regional organisations reacting to demographic change in peripheral rural areas (N=79)

Results of the case study

The case study results confirm the coincidence of cooperation and unilateral action, and describe in more detail when the respective mode of interaction is important. In all three studied regions, cooperation is crucial to acquire funding from the EU, the federal government or the German states. Another part of the partnerships is the sharing of experiences about unilaterally implemented projects and the information of the regional partners about what the different actors are currently dealing with. Regional actors also cooperate for conducting strategic documents and analyses such as regional development schemes, short distance traffic schedules or monitoring systems for visualizing and forecasting residential vacancy. These cooperations enable cost reductions using economies of scale.

Unlike the preparation of concepts, regional actors develop and implement their own projects very often unilaterally. This is particularly the case in very conflictive fields of action like urban planning or the development of public services. For instance local development of new building land bypasses regional strategies aimed at inner-development. Another problem is the postponement of conflicts. Therefore, regional actors agree on vague concepts or on decisions they do not adhere to afterwards. One example was a regional agreement about planned cycle paths, which local actors realized in completely different ways during the next years. Collectively developed and implemented projects addressing demographic changes are the exception. Three municipalities, for example, reached a consensus to renovate one secondary school at a good location and to close two others because of the declining number of pupils.

Nevertheless, rural actors act unilaterally in general, even though they harm other partners in the region with their behaviour. Municipalities have, for instance, introduced a grant for each baby born in the community or sell building lots at reduced prices for families. They do all this with the objective of attracting young families also from neighbouring municipalities. School boards apply

such a beggar-thy-neighbour strategy as well when they try to attract pupils from other school districts in order to maintain their school with the result that neighbouring schools have to close.

In addition to describing interactions among the different partners in the regions, the findings of the case studies give some insights into the causes underlying the identified modes of interaction. This empirical investigation is based on the theoretical background outlined above. In the studied rural regions, unilateral action dominates reactions to demographic change. Real cooperation would require the will for collaborative action and the consensus among the participants about objectives and feasible measures. Thus, the wide range of involved actors with different interests makes cooperation hardly possible and unilateral action probable. Many veto-players participate who come from different sectors, perceive the problems differently and have conflicting interests. Generally, location decisions provoke conflicts because not all actors profit equally, when for instance infrastructures are developed or closed. The regional actors also see themselves in competition for funding. In this zero-sum game, they perceive subsidies received by another participant more as an own loss. In addition, regional actors are afraid to lose their autonomy and are not interested in relinquishing their power to a regional organisation or a regional decision making structure.

Cooperation occurs particularly to acquire funding and to exchange experiences concerning funding procedures. The reasons are that, on the one hand, all regional actors share much interest in maximizing subsidies from upper tiers. On the other hand, rural and regional policy guidelines often require formal cooperation. As a consequence, concepts are often conducted in a way that they usually remain vague or have no binding force. Regional actors, thus, use this pseudo-partnership to receive funding for their own, unilaterally developed, uncoordinated projects.

The creation of sustainable bargaining systems sometimes leads to a positive assessment of the cooperation process among the participants and can create rules for decision making which facilitate consensus-making. These rules include agreements on how to allocate the co-funding for activities supported by rural development funds. Another facilitating institution is the initiation of regional competitions to find the optimal locations and project executing organisations for new public service facilities. The organisation which offers the best conditions is chosen to run the service.

If trust has arisen among the participants, common projects are sometimes possible even in conflictive policy fields, such as for example, the coordinated closing-down of schools. In this case, not only the continual development of mutual trust was decisive but also huge savings regarding needed investment costs.

Figure 3 summarises the causes of the observed modes of interaction in regional reactions to demographic change. The policy outcome and the arguments for them found in all three cases were selected and illustrated. Therefore, the most convincing factors are organised in the conceptual framework of Mayntz and Scharpf's actor-centred institutionalism (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995, Scharpf 1997). This framework is used in policy analysis to explain policy decisions with the institutional context, the situation, the actor orientations and the interaction of the actors.

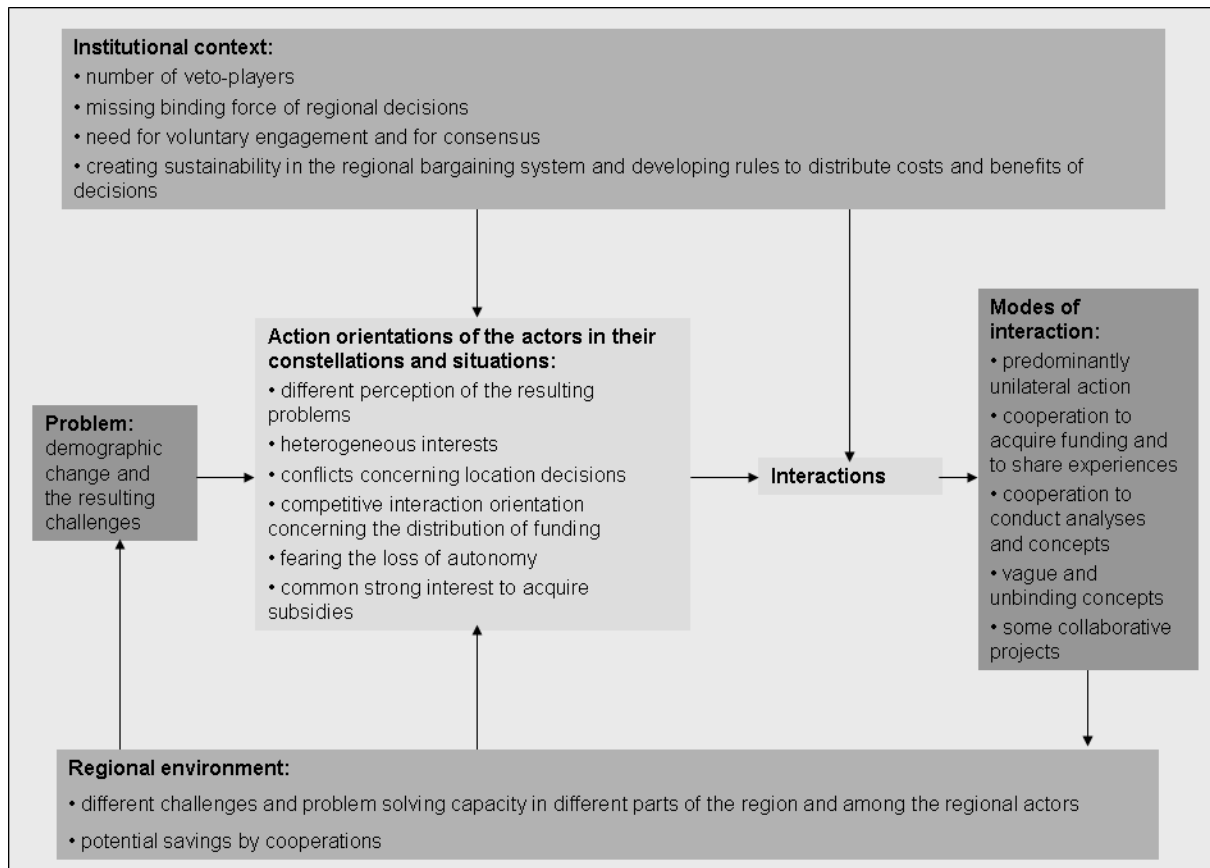


Figure 3: Empirically founded explanation of the mode of interaction in regional reactions to demographic change

Conclusions

The addressed research question consist of two parts. The first part deals with the description of the interactions among the rural actors for reacting to demographic change. The second part asks for reasons of the observed modes of interaction. As a result, the interactions between the regional actors are characterized by a combination of cooperation and unilateral action. Regional actors engage in cooperation most notably to acquire funding, to exchange experiences, to prepare concepts and to conduct analyses. They develop and implement their projects, however, predominantly unilaterally. The reasons for unilateral action include the voluntary engagement and the need for consensus in the regional bargaining system. Therefore, heterogeneous interests make an agreement difficult. Regional cooperation will almost only materialize if extensive savings are possible.

These conclusions imply some policy recommendations. First of all, the expectations regarding the potential of regional partnerships should be reduced. Regional cooperation seems not to be the most important reaction to demographic change. On the regional level, actors can commonly conduct analyses like the monitoring of residential vacancies and demographic projections at a small scale, which one single organisation could not afford. The regional partnership is also feasible to set topics, like population ageing and decline on the political agenda, and to discuss objectives and measures for responding to resulting challenges. The possibility for common projects seems to be rather limited and will remain exceptional in praxis, even though many scholars do not tire to postulate cooperation in scientific debates. Particularly, the reduction of public services is very conflictive and each provider struggles for his facility.

The limitation of membership in rural partnerships can facilitate regional cooperation. Participants should engage voluntarily and should be willing to cooperate. In addition, leaders of organisations should get along with each other very well. A common party affiliation can help in this respect, as well as trustful collaborations in the past and similar interests. However, the current trend in rural policy goes into the opposite direction in Germany. Leader groups or integrated rural development initiatives must cover bigger geographical entities and should be based on rural districts. Therefore, the probability increases that competitively oriented actors participate in these so called partnerships and block all common activities. These partnerships run the risk of becoming grant coalitions only cooperating to get the money from superordinate levels for their local uncoordinated projects (Bernt, 2009). The new rural governance structures, including regional managements, forums for discussion, working groups and efforts for network-building, are too expensive and much too time-consuming for such a simple funding administration.

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ⁱ The actor-centred institutionalism by Mayntz and Scharpf (1995) is an approach in policy analysis to explain policy decisions. It combines structure (institutions and policy environments) with agency (action orientation and interactions). The policy environment is here the regional situation in peripheral rural areas. In the regions, demographic change and resulting challenges appear on the political agenda. The actors in the regional area seize these issues. Every actor has his own interests, perceptions, capabilities and interaction orientation. Not only the policy environment but also the institutional context including funding guidelines, laws and social norms influences these regional actors. The actors interact with each other and come to regional policy decisions here concerning the applied mode of interaction.

ⁱⁱ The figure n in parentheses shows number of the 113 responding regional organisations that have answered these questions.