



Case Study

Strukturlotsen

Improving Inter-Municipal
Cooperation with Expert-Sharing
Across Administrations

Initiative for coal regions in transition

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Strukturlotsen – Improving Inter-Municipal Cooperation with Expert-Sharing Across Administrations

The project “Strukturlotsen” (which translates to: ‘structural pilots’) aims to improve the capacities of district authorities to pursue regional development through expertise-sharing.

The project brings four districts together, each one of them having a person (known as a ‘structural pilot’) responsible for supporting businesses, municipalities, and associations to access funding opportunities. The structural pilots investigate funding opportunities in the fields of tourism, health, economy, or local development. That way, rather than every district having to cover all of these topics, each specialises in one field, and shares their expertise with locals, groups, and associations across the four districts. “Strukturlotsen” thus makes use of inter-municipal synergies, and makes public administrations overall more effective and efficient.

DESCRIPTION

Location: Four German districts in Rhineland-Palatinate: Bad Kreuznach, Donnersbergkreis, Kusel, and Kaiserslautern

Type of action: Structural improvement to regional development management

Actors: Government representatives, local governments and counties, newly hired structural pilots

Financing conditions: Funding by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL)



KEY POINTS



APPROACH

- The creation of job positions called ‘structural pilots’ in four district administrations enhances whole region’s capacity for regional development by **sharing expertise across administrations** for cost-effective administrative support.



ACHIEVEMENTS

- By June 2023, structural pilots **consulted with 213 local groups** (businesses, municipalities, associations) to **find funding opportunities**;
- They **approached 86 local groups**, with which 32 on-site meetings were agreed upon;
- Organisation of information and networking **events**;
- Creation of an **overview of current funding sources and programmes**, and open-source guiding materials to support project development



ENABLING CONDITIONS

- Political will** of the four participating districts to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation and share responsibilities;
- Funding** made available through the Strukturlotsen project for districts to create new positions within administrations;
- Enough time** to recruit for the structural pilot positions and for onboarding;
- Good coordination and communication** between the four structural pilots and district administrations



CHALLENGES

- Finding **suitable candidates** for the structural pilot positions;
- Efficient **distribution of work** between the pilots;
- Ensuring that the pilots support businesses, municipalities and associations to initiate projects that are **actually considered ‘innovative’**;
- Monitoring and evaluating** the impact of the overall Strukturlotsen initiative.



FIGURE 1: MAIN TASKS TAKEN ON BY THE STRUCTURAL PILOTS.

Source: own compilation, based on strukturloessen.info

Introduction

Rural areas, not only in coal+ regions, often face the challenge of limited administrative capacity. Public funding programmes are often not fully exploited by these areas due to stakeholders not being aware of such programmes, or lacking the capacity to do the necessary paperwork to apply for available funding. This underlines the need to improve awareness among rural communities and municipalities of existing funding programmes, and to lower barriers to access financing. In parallel, rural areas may experience difficulties in remaining or being seen as attractive, future-oriented regions to live and work in.

In order to face these two challenges at the same time, four districts in Rhineland-Palatinate came up with an innovative idea of so-called ‘structural pilots’ working in the areas of tourism, health, economy, and local development. In this scheme, a ‘structural pilot’ is a job title: namely, a position responsible for supporting businesses, municipalities and associations to access funding opportunities. The structural pilots tackle bottlenecks associated with accessing funding programmes in the region in a cost-effective way.

Each of the four participating districts employs a structural pilot, and each of these is tasked with focusing on providing support either in the field of tourism, health, economy, or local development. Administration is made more effective through responsibility sharing among the four districts: instead of every district providing support across all topics on their own, the four participating districts share this four-people team of experts.

The structural pilots serve as contact points and consultants for people, organisations, associations, and communities who want to develop projects in the above-mentioned areas. They enable local initiatives to make effective use of funding programmes and other support opportunities. The structural pilots then support all districts with their specialised knowledge, and thus advance the region as a whole. Furthermore, these four districts aim to test governance structures and standards that might be applied in the other 20 districts in Rhineland-Palatinate, and potentially nationwide.

The structural pilots are responsible for three main areas of work: information activities, inspiring and developing ideas, and project consultation and development. (see Figure 1).

Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL), the structural pilots programme aims to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation, and should contribute to creating more equal living conditions throughout the greater region. Participating districts are the neighbouring administrative areas of Kusel, Kaiserslautern, Bad Kreuznach, and Donnersberg (see Figure 2). This iteration of the programme started in August 2021 and will run until July 2024.

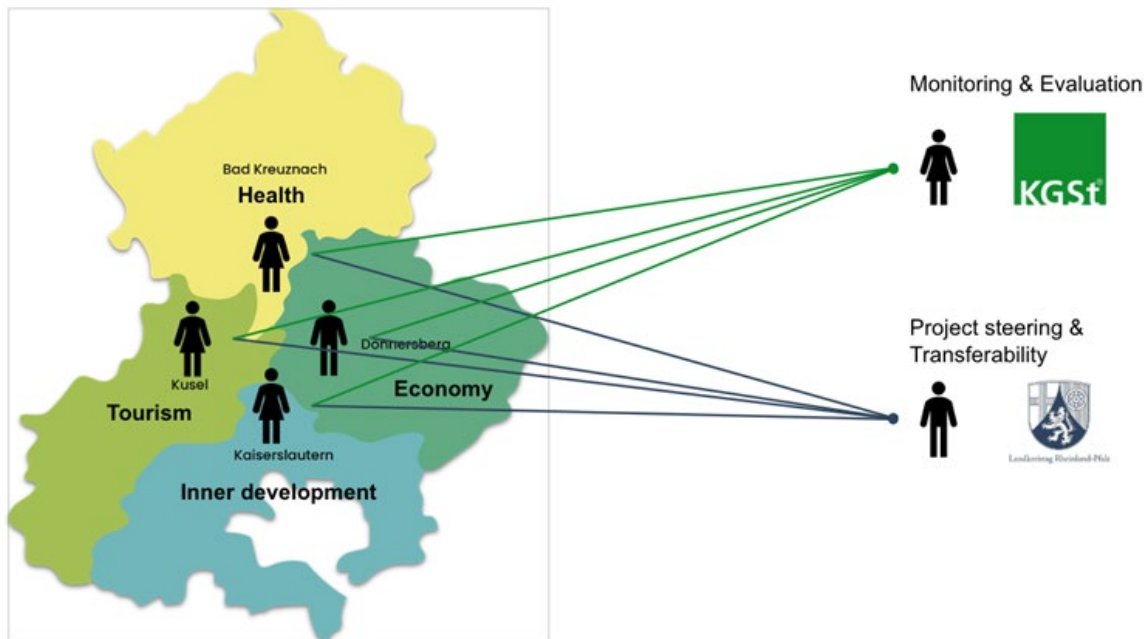


FIGURE 2: MAP OF THE FOUR PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS, INDICATING WHICH FIELD EACH ‘STRUCTURAL PILOT’ FOCUSED ON, AS WELL AS OVERALL MONITORING, EVALUATION, PROJECT STEERING, AND TRANSFERABILITY.

Source: Landkreistag Rheinland-Pfalz

Key challenges

Finding suitable candidates for the structural pilot positions was particularly challenging. Civil service jobs in Germany are usually considered attractive because they provide long-term employment; however, this was not the case for the structural pilots due to the limited project period. Offering limited contracts to applicants was seen as an additional hurdle, which came on top of the fact that it is often difficult to find workers in rural areas. The pilots who were ultimately hired have different educational backgrounds, and only one had prior experience with subsidy management; yet, all were seen as suitable candidates for the position.

A main goal of the project is to use public resources by distributing fields of focus among the pilots more efficiently according to their expertise. However, delineation is not always easy, as topics and requests are frequently cross-cutting, touching on tourism, health, economy, and local development. For example, the energy modernisation of a hospital is relevant to both economy and health. As a result, more than one structural pilot often had to be involved in a single request for support. Additionally, there was greater need for support in the fields of local development and tourism, leading to unequal distribution of workload.

During the first two years of the project, it became apparent that fostering ‘innovative’ projects remained challenging. Instead, incoming project ideas brought to the structural pilots were often considered ‘standard projects’. The groups that brought these ideas forth were in need of consultation; however, the structural pilots’ specific expertise were not necessarily required to provide this support.

Structural pilots’ list of tasks did not include providing inputs to support monitoring and evaluation, which proved to be a challenge. Since structural pilots are only one element of the complex project development chain, it is anyhow difficult to measure their actual impact. Nonetheless, a designated research partner, KGSt, is responsible for monitoring and evaluation.

Enabling conditions

Appropriate funding was a precondition for creating the structural pilot positions. The project is funded by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture and is embedded in BULE, a federal programme for rural development. The funding covers the personnel costs equivalent to 5.5 full time positions (the four pilots plus the two positions at KGSt and the county association of Rhineland-Palatinate for project oversight). Furthermore, funding covers the costs of providing training to and consulting local groups, materials and travel expenses, as well as training for the structural pilots themselves. The overall budget for the three-year project is around 1.2 million EUR.

Calculating enough time to recruit suitable structural pilots and to train them was particularly important. In this case, it took around half a year for every position to be filled, and for the initiative to be fully running.

Good coordination and communication between the pilots and the county association of Rhineland-Palatinate was essential to most efficiently using the resources available, and to have fully integrated common knowledge management. This knowledge includes weekly scans of subsidy calls, which are then assigned to the pilots



The project would not have been possible without the initiative of the four participating districts, who proposed the idea of the project to the federal ministry as a way to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation, learning, and openness to sharing responsibilities

depending on their topic, and discussed during a weekly meeting.

Additionally, the project would not have been possible without the initiative of the four participating districts, who proposed the idea of the project to the federal ministry as a way to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation, learning, and openness to sharing responsibilities.

Achievements

As explained earlier, it is difficult to quantify the achievements of this project; furthermore, interim and final evaluations had not yet taken place at the time of writing (September 2023). However, the project has already revealed an increased need for this sort of consultation services for local businesses, municipalities, and associations. Overall, 213 consultations took place by June 2023, showing that these are very well-received. By then, the structural pilots had additionally approached 86 local groups, with which 32 on-site meetings were agreed upon. Structural pilots stressed the importance of developing direct personal contacts with these local entities, as these meetings resulted in new project ideas and possibilities for targeted support.

The pilots also arranged information and networking events (one example is shown in Box 1), created an overview of current funding sources and programmes, and produced open-source guiding materials, including templates and checklists.

EXAMPLE OF AN OUTCOME OF THE STRUCTURAL PILOTS INITIATIVE: AN INFORMATION AND NETWORKING EVENT TO STRENGTHEN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Vacant residential and farm buildings in the centres of villages, as well as unused areas between buildings in villages, increasingly shape the image of many rural communities. Due to demographic and structural changes, many countryside communities are threatened with the loss of a lively, attractive town centre. In order to draw attention to this problem and associated challenges, the structural pilot for the Kaiserslautern district organised an information and networking event entitled “Local development concerns us all”.

- Main goal: Raising awareness of the challenges around local development in rural areas, and presenting ideas to tackle them.
- Participants: Representatives of local politics and citizens.
- Content: Various presentations demonstrated the potential of local development in rural areas, with examples that spanned town planning, possibilities for local action, practical experiences from village restructuring, and energy management.

Further reading (in German)

- Website of the project: strukturlotsen.info
- www.bmel.de/DE/themen/laendliche-regionen/foerderung-des-laendlichen-raumes/bundesprogramm-laendliche-entwicklung/strukturlotsen.html
- landkreistag.rlp.de/homepage/aktuelles/2022/januar/18-01-2022-die-strukturlotsen-und-strukturlotsinnen-sind-da/
- wir-im-landkreis.de/2021/07/30/strukturlotsen-machen-kommunale-verwaltung-leistungsfaeiger/

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