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THE CONTRIBUTION OF URBAN-RURAL PARTNERSHIPS TO TERRITORIAL COHESION: RESULTS OF INTERREG IVC URMA

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the theoretical approach and critically examine the results of the INTERREG IVC URMA project “Urban-rural partnerships in selected European metropolitan areas” (2012-2014). Within the framework of the URMA project, we define urban-rural partnerships as project-oriented cooperation initiatives between different actors in metropolitan areas and their surrounding and more distant rural hinterlands with the aim of establishing stable but flexible cooperation structures. Over three years of duration, nine participating partners from Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland have developed ideas on how urban-rural partnerships can be developed and implemented over the long-term in selected thematic fields of spatial development.

The purpose of the article is twofold: (1) to review the policy framework on urban-rural partnerships at the European level and in Germany as an instrument of territorial cohesion and (2) to give an account of the implementation of urban-rural partnerships within the framework of the URMA project. Special attention will be given to the rationale behind the URMA project, manifestations of governance arrangements, lessons learnt and challenges arising from urban-rural cooperation in pilot regions in Germany/Denmark (Hamburg-Jutland), the Netherlands (Twente) and Italy (Lombardy).

For this background, the article will address the following questions:

- What conditions are necessary to stimulate more intensive urban-rural partnerships?
- In which sectors could urban and rural actors benefit from a closer cooperation?
- What are the lessons learnt from URMA regions implementing urban-rural partnerships in the context of territorial cohesion?

The analysis of the policy frameworks and state of affairs of urban-rural partnerships in the URMA partner regions and countries is based on questionnaires distributed to the partner regions. Furthermore, the paper draws on the findings of the pilot field reports updated by the project partners four times per year. Also, the results are derived from presentations given during workshops, study visits and conferences which took place within the framework of the URMA-Project between August 2012 and June 2014 in Szczecin, Krakow, Florence, Hamburg and Milan, Pleven and Enschede, where pilot-responsible persons reported on the current progress. In addition, on-site observations from the study visits to pilot regions in Hamburg, (2013), Lombardy (October

2013) and Twente (2014) have been included. Finally, additional data was collected by reviewing respective planning documents, specific project reports, minutes and interviews with regional planning officials published in URMA-newsletters.

The results indicate that it is important to disseminate more effectively the experience from previous and currently running EU and national programmes (e.g. INTERREG, LEADER, demonstration projects such as Moro in Germany) as a source of contacts and know-how for urban-rural partnerships to be established. Often, there are already existing projects fostering urban-rural partnerships, but they are little known by regional policy makers and administrations. Therefore, there is a need for a more effective information exchange between regional and local planning levels. It is significant that the pilot case studies Hamburg-Jutland, Twente and Lombardy have proved effective in activating dialogue and stimulating the spirit of co-responsibility and regional solidarity among the involved actors, specifically among community groups, NGOs, local and regional administrations and academia.

The challenges facing urban-rural partnerships are related to the low awareness of the benefits that urban-rural cooperation can deliver and the lack of a strategically operating organization that could take forward the idea of urban-rural partnerships and manage it for a wider regional benefit. Another difficulty is the poor involvement of the business community in development projects. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many urban-rural partnerships face problems that cross sectoral boundaries, most prominently between the departments responsible for agriculture and spatial development.

The authors hope that the paper will contribute to the current European debate on the future of cohesion policy framework with regard to urban-rural cooperation.

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