DESIRA

DESIRA POLICY BRIEF

Digital public administrations for future-proof rural regions

Germany is lagging behind other EU countries in terms of the digitalisation of public administration and services of general interest. At the same time, local administrations are relevant actors in exploiting the potential opportunities of digitalisation, especially in rural areas. This contradictory situation also applies to the municipality of Betzdorf-Gebhardshain, where the Rhineland-Palatinate Living Lab is located. A scenario workshop with citizens and public administration staff revealed that the Online Access Act is seen as a touchstone for future development. With this law, all administrative units in Germany must offer their services digitally by the end of 2022. A positive scenario emphasises the opportunities and possibilities of digitalisation for life in Betzdorf-Gebhardshain, while a negative scenario focuses on possible risks and challenges of the future. Both paths refer to the importance of aspects such as digital acceptance, inclusion, participation of the population and exchange between public administration and citizens.

CONTEXT

Compared to other EU countries, Germany is lagging behind when it comes to the digitalisation of public administration and services of general interest (see figure 1). One of the measures intended to remedy this situation is the Online Access Act (OAA). Almost 600 different public administration services at all levels (from municipalities to the federal government) must be offered digitally by the end of 2022.

The OAA is a challenge, particularly for rural public administrations, as their financial and human resources are limited. Furthermore, the technical infrastructures are very heterogeneous and, due to the administrative autonomy, processes are not standardised.

But digitalisation also offers a wide range of opportunities for rural areas. In addition to administrative services in the narrower sense, digitalisation can add value to services of general interest for both citizens and the local economy.

The municipality of Betzdorf-Gebhardshain, where the Rhineland-Palatinate Living Lab (LL) is located, faces the typical challenges of many rural areas in Germany. These include the exodus of young people, a lack of job and training perspectives, and the limited supply of public services.

The LL therefore explores how digitalisation can contribute to improving living conditions in rural areas. The focus is on the perspective of public administration, as municipal administrations play a central role in the digitalisation of rural territories. In particular, the LL examines the exchange between municipalities, citizens, business and civil society. Betzdorf-Gebhardshain is comparatively far advanced in terms of digital infrastructure as well as in the provision of digital services. The implementation of the OAA therefore entails potential, but also risks that need to be considered.
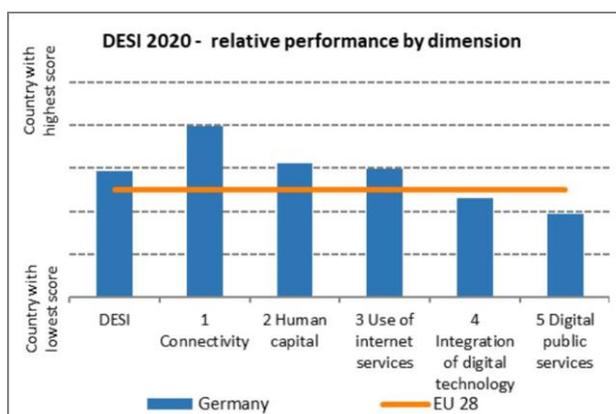

Figure 1. Germany's relative performance in different digitalisation indicators.
Source: DESI Country Profile Germany 2020

RESEARCH APPROACH

Digital means of communication have massively changed our everyday life in recent years (see Figure 2). This not only refers to the way we inform ourselves but also affects how we interact with each other. In addition to their official gazettes, public administrations now have websites and are active on social media. This illustrates that digital communication, as is widely believed, not only brings the world together, but also has a severe impact on the very local level.

A DISCUSSION ON HOW WE WANT TO LIVE TOGETHER (DIGITALLY) IN THE FUTURE IS NECESSARY AT ALL LEVELS.

This situation has given rise to the need to discuss how we want to live together as a society in an increasingly digital world in the future. This issue was explored in a scenario workshop that focused on the following question:

"**What will digital living (together) look like in Betzdorf-Gebhardshain in 2031?**"

Figure 2. Scene from the "Betzdorf digital" office in the municipality of Betzdorf-Gebhardshain where the Rhineland-Palatinate Living Lab is located. Copyright: Verbandsgemeinde Betzdorf-Gebhardshain.

The workshop followed the methodology of scenario planning. A set of relevant drivers of change was pre-defined, including aspects such as the demographic and economic structure or the diffusion and acceptance of digital services. On this basis, two scenarios were developed together with citizens and public administration staff. One of these refers to a positive development while the other one describes a course until 2031 that has a negative outcome.

SCENARIOS DEVELOPED

In the positive scenario, the opportunities and possibilities of digitalisation for life in Betzdorf-Gebhardshain are emphasised: The starting point is the successful implementation of the OAA. On the part of the users, well-designed services will lead to a high rate of acceptance. On the part of the local public administration, digitalisation will make processes more efficient. Freed-up capacities can be invested in improving services of general interest. This includes better medical care, e.g. through telemedicine, or even robots employed in nursing care. The way we work is also becoming more flexible, so people have fewer reasons to migrate to cities, which benefits rural areas.

Overall, digitalisation therefore has a positive impact on all areas of life in the region.

In the negative scenario, the focus is on possible risks and challenges of the future: Unused potentials and misguided developments have set in motion a downward spiral that affects many areas. Thus, the implementation of the OAA fails in many parts. In the long term, this not only massively restricts the ability of the local public administration to proactively shape the region, but also prevents digital acceptance on the part of the citizens. Some sections of the population even feel excluded, which ultimately affects the most elementary democratic participation processes.

In the economic area, developments already known today continue unabated: Small local businesses disappear and give way to competition from the Internet, and the exodus due to the lack of job prospects increases the shortage of skilled workers. All of this contributes to ageing communities and a dwindling of services of general interest such as medical care and public transportation.

POLICY RELATED DISCUSSION

In essence, digitalisation is initially open-ended and entails both opportunities and risks. With regard to the process of exchange and interaction in the community, one example that can be mentioned here is that digital communication can lead to more anonymity if it displaces personal contacts. On the other hand, the opportunity arises to intensify exchange by allowing interaction to take place where only one-way information exchange occurred in the past (i.e. without opportunities for feedback; see Figure 3). This leads to the conclusion that the success of rural digitalisation depends above all on how the process of transformation is shaped. The scenario workshops conducted with LL members offered some suggestions for active implementation in this regard:

The expansion of the digital infrastructure is a necessary basis, but it is not sufficient. Not all municipalities in rural areas are positioned as well as Betzdorf-Gebhardshain in this respect. Nevertheless, the example of the Living Lab shows how municipal commitment can lead to success.

HOW CAN WE INVOLVE ALL PARTS OF THE POPULATION IN DIGITALISATION AND HOW CAN WE COUNTER THE SCEPTICISM OF THE POPULATION TOWARDS DIGITAL ADMINISTRATION?

In both scenarios, the crucial factor for a sustainable exchange between the public administration and the local population is the successful implementation of the OAA. In this regard, the technical component is merely one aspect. Success here also includes that both the local population and the staff in public administrations implement well-conceived processes and innovative solutions. Highly skilled staff and acceptance by the local population are further success factors.

It has also been shown that municipal digitalisation does not stop with administrative services. The area of services of general interest, too, is linked to concrete expectations. This includes the insurance of medical care, up-to-date equipment for schools and students, as well as public transport as a viable alternative to motorized individual transport.

All of this assumes that municipalities are capable of exploiting the opportunities offered by digitalisation for the provision of services of general interest and are able to act as modern service providers. This would also counteract the "dusty" image of public administrations and increase their attractiveness as employers.

Equally necessary, however, is a local population that is willing and able to participate. On the one hand, this requires countering the scepticism about digitalised public administrations and, on the other hand, enabling participation in decision-making processes (see Figure 3).

Moreover, the communication of concrete knowledge must also be ensured, e.g., what data is stored for what purpose. So, the challenge is to answer questions such as: How can we involve as many sections of the local population as possible in digitalisation? Which exchange platforms are necessary? How can a broad understanding be achieved? How can people – and especially younger people – be motivated to get involved?
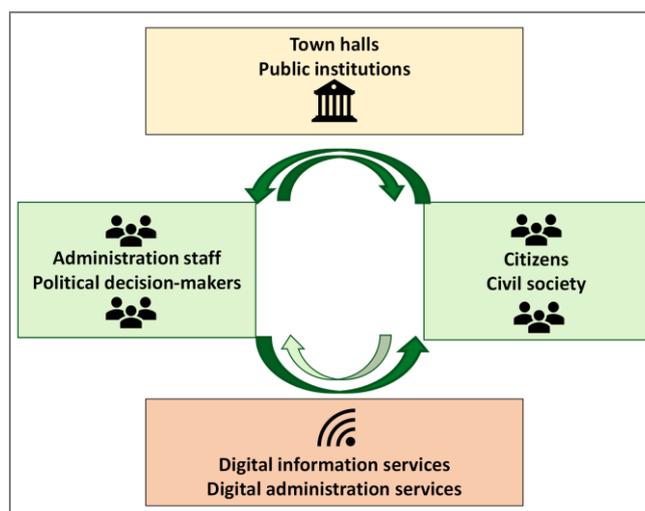

Figure 3. Exchange between public and private actors
The light green arrow indicates that digital exchange is still predominantly unidirectional.

POLICY OPTIONS

Strengthening public administrations
- Ensuring up-to-date technical equipment.
- Providing resources for the success implementation of the OAA.
- Ensuring sufficient and well-qualified staff in general.
- Making digitalisation in public administration an integral part of human resources and organisational development.

Enabling participation in the digitalisation process
- Taking advantage of the willingness and interest of citizens to help shape the digital transformation.
- Defining processes and formats that allow and encourage co-determination.

Empowering citizens
- Ensuring exchange and interaction between local government and the local population.
- Providing information – e.g. on the OAA – in a way that is appropriate for the target groups and offering feedback channels.
- Promoting transparency in local public administration.
- Combating 'fake news' and preventing misinformation.
- Integrating younger people, in particular, into political work.

Creating conditions for digital acceptance by the local population and in public administration
- Allowing for a broad understanding throughout society on the topic of "What do we want and how do we want to live?"
- Promoting openness among local residents through transparency.
- Fostering the engagement of people who are actively involved in political decision-making.

Expanding digital services of general interest
- Promoting mobile working.
- Implementing incentives for home office, e.g. through subsidies.
- Expanding telemedicine services.
- Exploiting digital potential in education.

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