Social innovations by elderly people – New perspectives for rural regions?

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RSA Winter Conference, 15th of November 2018
Research Subjects

• Elderly people
  • 60 years old or older (age); person is retired (position on the labor market); person has a grandchild or several grandchildren (social role) (World Health Organization)

• Social innovations
  • Newly recombined and variegated knowledge and practices
  • Certain degree of novelty
  • Deviate from customary forms of action
  • Must be implemented in practice, institutionalized, and spread spatially
  • Analytical vs. normative term
  • Communicative constructs that influence spatial transformations
A Focused Ethnography for Analyzing Social Innovations by Elderlies

Participant Observations

Qualitative Interviews

Housshold Survey

Document Analysis
Innovation Hub 13 – fast track to transfer

Elderly People and Innovative Projects
An Elderly Mayor in Rural Western Germany

• Andreas Fellner, elderly (66 years old, retired, grandfather) mayor of rural Kremmen
  • High percentage of vacancy and an atmosphere of resignation in the peripheral rural Eifel region

• Fellner as incubator for new ideas and key figure
  • Launched an art and culture initiative in 2012
  • Intermediary who connects heterogeneous actors, mobilizes them, translated complex issues between them and mediates potential conflicts
  • Set up a positive discourse about Kremmen in the media

• Spatial Transformations
  • Managed to build a critical mass needed for change and initiated spatial transformations
  • Replacing the temporary uses of art with permanent and sustainable commercial shop concepts
  • Model for the successful revitalisation of rural regions
An Elderly Village Caretaker in Rural Brandenburg

- Gustav Brinker, elderly village caretaker, (70 years old, retired, grandfather)
  - High (long-term) unemployment rate; young, well educated people left the peripheral rural village
  - Project “village caretaker” initiated in 2012
    - Project “engaged citizen for Breitenbach” with a community garden, a village kitchen, and a village workshop was established
    - Reopening of the village shop was not successful
- Brinker could not establish as key figure
  - Resigned after two years of local engagement
  - Low local cultural identification
  - Did not take advantage of his position as village caretaker
- Frustration, lethargy and conflicts limit chances for spatial transformations
  - Communication problems, divergent attitudes and inter-personal conflicts
Elderly People as Innovators in Rural Regions

- Theoretical studies on and ethnographic investigations of rural social innovations by elderly rare
- Elderly can act as key figures depending on...
  - Personal attributes
  - Network capacities
  - Social recognition
  - Adaptation to local cultural structures
- Certain potential of elderly people as incubators for social innovations
  - Practical relevance for regions affected by demographic changings and aging populations
  - Enhances theories on social innovation agency
  - Inductive research needs deeper understanding
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