

Article

A Renewal of Integrated Concepts as a Strategy for Enhancing Its Own Scope as a Small Town in a Shrinking Realm: The Case of Schmölln/Thuringia

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Abstract

What does it mean to bring climate adaptation and sustainability “on the ground” into a Thuringian small town that is both urban and rural? From 2021 to 2024, we conducted a cooperative research project with the municipality to investigate this. For three years, the research partners explored ways to integrate the “big” topics of climate adaptation, sustainability, public services, and demographic change into the everyday urban development processes of a small town in rural Thuringia, an area experiencing long-term population decline. The result of the project is three volumes in the ISDN series that provide initial answers, which are often derived from the combination of research and teaching. One volume focuses on energy, housing, and mobility, presenting stakeholders, projects, and research results that can be used to address these issues locally in rural-urban municipalities more broadly. Another collects findings on socio-infrastructure planning, offering a dedicated perspective on gender and youth “in the countryside”. Ultimately, all socio-infrastructure planning activities aim to support an “Urban Social Cultural Care”. This article aims to contextualize transfer-oriented research within theoretical debates on sustainability transitions, paying special attention to the opportunities available to municipalities with limited administrative resources to enhance their own scope of action.

Keywords: small town; rural; integrated urban development strategy; social infrastructure; sustainability; Schmölln; Thuringia

1. Introduction

1.1. Aim of the ISDN-Research Project

Small towns are often under-researched places [1,2]; however, they are a theater not to be neglected for climate-adaptive and transformative urban planning. Admittedly, the top-priority of municipal strategies in demographically challenged, peripheral rural areas might be a different one: keep the small town alive [3–5]. That means the maintenance of infrastructures and of a lively town center and efforts to balance out the demographic balance [6,7].

The ISDN project [8], funded by the Federal Ministry of Research 2021–24, linked the often isolated challenges of public service (*Daseinsvorsorge*—we keep these and some other technical terms in German with not always direct one-word translations) and sustainability. To this end, we further developed the German planning instrument of an Integrated Urban Development Concept (*Integriertes Stadtentwicklungskonzept*—ISEK). After ca. 25 years of its



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introduction, an ISEK might be called a traditional planning instrument; still, it remains often in the niche of its very national urban funding scheme (*Städtebauförderung*), and its potential for a municipal strategy to integrate relevant aspects of urban development seems often overlooked. Originally, ISEKs have been applied to develop urban regeneration strategies to respond to demographic changes, i.e., population losses, especially in East Germany. After 2002, many ISEKs steered the process of a parallel demolition and upgrading of apartment blocks [9] associated with the neighborhood development of the *Stadtumbau* (urban transformation) program within the *Städtebauförderung*. In the ISDN project, we aimed to renew this conceptual approach without losing its original character. The project was designed as an empirical investigation into how integrated planning instruments can function as governance mechanisms under conditions of demographic shrinkage and limited administrative capacity. Rather than proposing a normative model of renewal, the study examines institutional practices, actor constellations, and decision-making logics that shape the operational scope of small municipalities. We challenged the ISEK to deal with sustainability and *Daseinsvorsorge* tasks, too. While the transfer-oriented research [10,11] leaned closely against the German planning concepts and funding schemes (from *Daseinsvorsorge* to *Städtebauförderung*), its results are generalizable to urban transition tasks of small towns, which are often core territorial items of rural peripheries.

The aim of the ISDN project [12–14] was to develop an Integrated Strategy for Public Services and Sustainability (ISDN). This strategy should pool municipal resources as well for its urban and rural territorial items—as small towns often have incorporated numerous villages into their municipal limits [15,16]. In doing so, the strategy should “municipalize” aspects of a *Daseinsvorsorge* scheme that is mainly located on a regional planning level [17] and additionally link them with climate goals and the infrastructural aspects of public services. The primary focus was not on combining funds or simplifying funding applications, but rather on developing and implementing a locally anchored, cross-policy approach to deal with individual funding policies of the various federal and state ministries (which also incorporate corresponding EU funding policies, such as the ERDF and EAGF). Cross-policy was indispensable, particularly with regard to the federal government’s climate goals, but also in linking urban and rural settlement types. The ISDN aimed to:

- implement an (inter-)municipal sustainability strategy that actually integrates vertically and horizontally relevant aspects from sustainability and demography issues into a municipally based spatial development concept document (with democratic legitimation by the municipal bodies);
- methodically further develop the ISEK as a planning instrument to make this research outcome applicable for other municipalities in Germany, particularly with regard to the integration of urban and rural parts of municipalities into a common strategy and the inter-municipal potential of an ISEK;
- examine the results of the Thuringian municipal administrative reform with regard to public services and sustainability and draw conclusions for further reform steps (that can be observed and adopted by other federal states).

For the ISDN, we applied instruments of urban regeneration (originally territorially neighborhood-based) to spatial categories of (inter-)municipal and/or regional planning and to aspects of sustainability and infrastructural public services.

1.2. The Complicated Theatre: Schmölln and Gößnitz as a Municipal Realm

In the hilly landscapes of eastern Thuringia, the towns of Schmölln and Gößnitz represent ordinary towns. They are not extraordinary like other places in Thuringia—Weimar (66,000 inh.) with its Bauhaus or the former residences of Meiningen (25,000 inh.)

and Altenburg (31,000 inh.) which makes them locations of large theaters still today. They are just two of the many small towns in Thuringia with below 50,000 inhabitants. Thuringia is one of the smaller ones of the 16 states of Germany, with 2.1 Mio inhabitants on 16,000 km². 40% of the population lives in municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants, and another 40% in towns between 5000 and 50,000 inhabitants. Even its small metropolitan region of well-known Erfurt, Jena, and Weimar together has hardly ½ million inhabitants together (including the suburbs). Thuringia is a small town-state with 850 settlement items [18–20]—historic small towns and villages. Schmölln is just one of them.

The town in the Altenburg region lies in the far east of Thuringia. The nearest major cities are Gera and Zwickau in Saxony; the closest metropolis is Leipzig. The town, including its incorporated villages (see Figure 1), has a population of 13,500—but the territorial cohesion of the municipalities is larger [21]. Since 1994, Schmölln has been linked to neighboring Gößnitz, a very small town (3500 inhabitants), by an inter-municipal agreement, as both share the function of a medium-sized center in spatial planning. Essentially, Gößnitz is home to an important railway junction; Schmölln's core town is otherwise the largely monocentric location in this area. In addition, there are so-called *erfüllte* [literally: “fulfilled”] municipalities, which are administered by one of the two towns, comprising another 2000 residents spread across three villages. In total, almost 19,000 residents are part of this territorial entity. We translate *Erfüllung* as by-them-administrated. In addition to *Erfüllung*, there is also the better-known option that several places join together to form a joint administration (*Verwaltungsgemeinschaft*); the more familiar term from the former Prussian administration is *Amt* (literally: office). In both cases, this means that the mayors are only honorary politicians, comparable to council members in larger municipalities. Administration is outsourced to the *Amt* or the neighboring municipality.

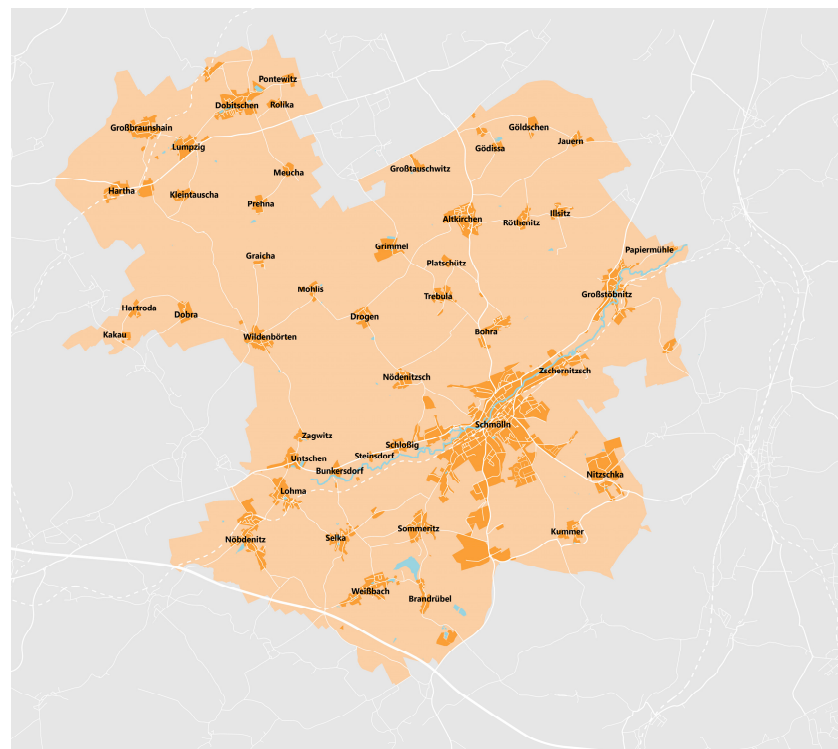


Figure 1. The municipality of Schmölln and its districts (Lena Knacker).

Besides the administrative complications, it is a monocentric municipality with a very clear urban core that has spread around Schmölln's market square since the Middle Ages. At the same time, it is rural: roughly 50 villages and hamlets belong to this territorial entity. It

is an intermunicipal, almost subregional realm with municipal governance. In this logic, the case is transferable to peripheral areas. Eventually, Schmölln and Gößnitz stand as subtle yet significant witnesses to a profound transformation in spatial planning, demographic shifts, and regional identity. These small towns are not just geographic locations—they represent complex laboratories of transition, where concepts of sustainability, urban renewal, regional coordination, and civic engagement intersect.

The article is divided into the following sections: After explaining the methodology of the research project (2), Section 3 contextualizes the case in current planning theory discourses. We briefly outline the role of small towns with regard to, e.g., sustainability and public services. The legacy of the post-reunification period in East Germany and administrative reforms are addressed as particular contexts that need to be contextualized to planning. The following subsequent chapters present the results, with Section 4 focusing on the municipal outcome and Section 5 on transferability. Finally, we discuss these results in Section 6.

2. Methodology and Process of the ISDN Research Project

The ISDN research project was divided into three different phases: an analysis phase, a Living Lab phase, and an elaboration phase. These phases differed in their methodological selection and target definition.

In the analysis phase, we focused on recording the current status quo and identifying problems and challenges in connection with the organization of public services and the implementation of sustainable development. Case-handler interviews [22] were conducted with relevant actors in the provision of public services (see Table 1). Eleven planning cases were analyzed within five months in terms of decision-making by interviewees [23], with a researcher as an almost investigative case-handler and another researcher as a neutral interviewer. The aim was to reflect on the decision-making processes [24], identify challenges and successes, and derive suggestions for the future handling of planning processes. In this way, we were able to recognize existing obstacles to achieving the sustainability goals and identify potential for integrated planning [25].

Table 1. Sampling logic of the case-handler interviews.

Work Packages	A Town and Village as Equal Components of Municipal Belonging	B Mobility in the Context of the 15-Minutes- City-Discourse	C Commercial Development with Regard to Sustainable Land Use	D Inter- Municipal and Innovative Educational Landscape	E Healthcare Infrastructure	W Housing
Number of Cases per Work Package	1	2	2	4	1	1
Number of Case-Handler Interviews	0	3	2	4	1	1

Before the project started, the transfer-oriented joint project leadership of a university researcher and the mayor of Schmölln defined five thematic work packages. While acknowledging the certain positionality [10], this helped to steer the research inside municipal administration. One work package was dedicated to the topic of town and village as equal components of municipal belonging (A). A further work package examined mobility (B) in the context of the 15-Minutes-City-Discourse [26]. In addition, one work package analyzed commercial development with regard to sustainable land use (C). The inter-municipal

and innovative educational landscape (D) and healthcare infrastructure (E) formed further work packages, which were supplemented by the overarching topic of housing (Figure 2).

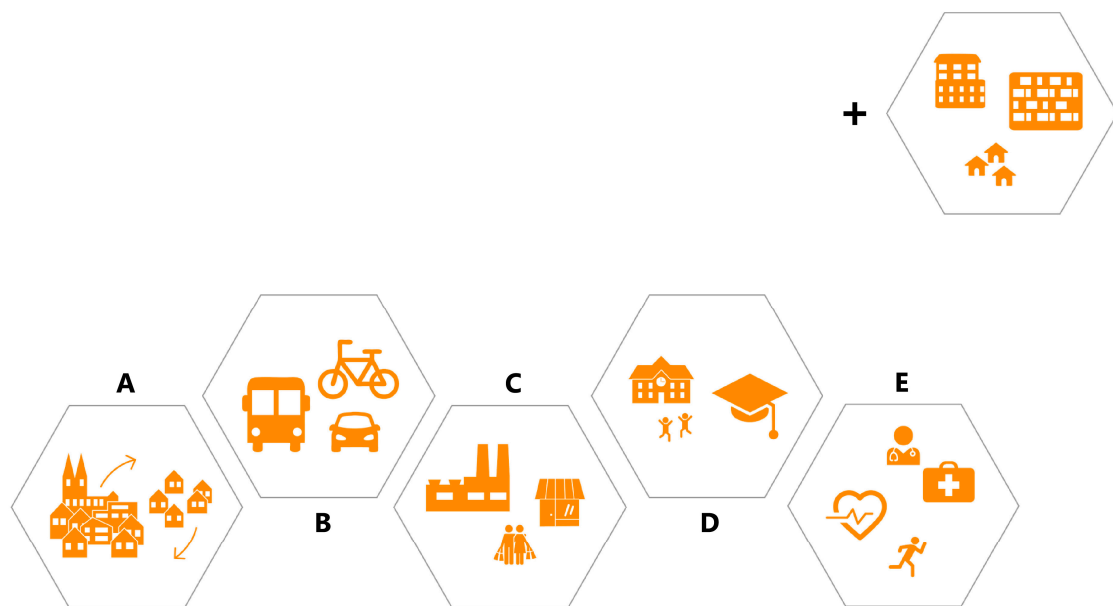


Figure 2. Work packages in the analysis phase (Lena Knacker).

Based on the previous analysis, we identified topics by the case-handler method that should be investigated in greater depth in the Living Lab phase (Figure 3). Living Labs are a recognized method for creating an experimental space at the intersection of science and practice. Three key features characterize living Labs: They are temporally and spatially limited test spaces in which innovative technologies or business models are tested under real-life conditions, and they utilize legal leeway and are associated with a regulatory interest in knowledge [27]. As a result, Living Labs play an important role in transdisciplinary sustainability research. They represent a link between science and practice and integrate the different bodies of knowledge into the research process to generate new knowledge [11]. In addition to fulfilling the research objective of producing new knowledge, Living Labs also serve to initiate transformation processes [28,29]. They functioned as an institutional testing ground in which competing planning rationalities and sectoral priorities became visible. Rather than assuming transformative success, the analysis focuses on how deliberative formats altered problem definitions, redistributed knowledge authority, and reconfigured administrative routines.

We divided the Living Lab phase, which ran for around ten months, into four main topics. The topics of bicycle traffic (Lab I), Gößnitz's train station (Lab II), renewable energies (Lab III), and the rural educational landscape and socio-cultural infrastructure (Lab IV) were examined using a mix of methods, including workshops, charrettes, site visits, surveys, and interviews (e.g., [30]). The Living Lab was organized decentrally so that the activities could take place at various locations in Schmölln and Gößnitz: for example, at the Gößnitz train station or along the route to the industrial estate in Schmölln. Although the decentralization in terms of location and time increased the complexity of project management, it made it easier to mobilize stakeholders for individual events that could be integrated into their everyday work, study, or volunteer activities. The sub-labs comprised a public charrette, several workshops in different formats, and a simulation game as a follow-up, which provided for the involvement of stakeholders at the state level. This made it possible to gain insights at several levels. Results were generated for the municipal administrations in Schmölln and Gößnitz, transferable findings for Thuringia as

well as scientific results. We developed the specific content of the Living Lab collaboratively in corresponding networks. For each topic, representatives from various administrative bodies, civil society, and the University of Kassel came together. Each sub-event of the Living Lab (see Figure 3) was designed individually and comprised at least 15 persons per event—from school kids in a class discussing with the researcher to council-like honorary meetings of a “seniors advisory board” to the municipal council to hybrid workshops with nationwide-acting researchers and practitioners on specific themes like station areas). The highlight of every Living Lab was a Charrette. the overarching leitmotif was that the design of each sub-event must fit prior to the participant’s, not to the researcher’s needs. This resulted not only in a summary compilation of the work items but also in cognitive integration. Together we defined questions on the topics worked on in the Living Lab and strategic goals.

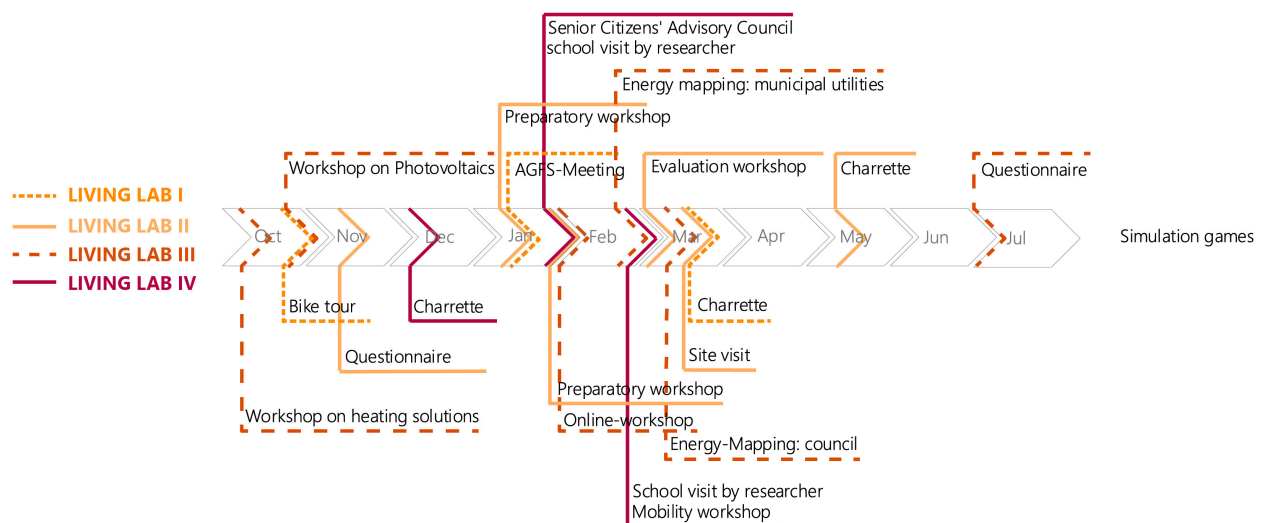


Figure 3. Method mix of the living labs (Lena Knacker).

Living Lab I “Bicycle traffic as part of a small town’s traffic transition” addressed the issue of expanding cycling from an everyday perspective. In a charrette, we examined the cycle path sections and quality of stay on a route from the town center of Schmölln to the nearby industrial estate as an example. The aim was to identify small-scale measures to improve road safety and route design and to investigate the potential for linear spatial structures to become the subject of a community-controlled overall measure. The combination of different planning and funding procedures was also to be considered. In the following simulation game, we looked at the different responsibilities and hierarchical levels of cycle path expansion and examined the decision-making process [31].

Using the example of a train junction, the Living Lab II “Gößnitz train station and center—urban regeneration for a station vicinity” examined how the principles of Transit Oriented Development can be applied to the area between the train station and town center using the methods and schemes of urban regeneration. A charrette at the station, in which students and residents from Gößnitz inspected the area, identified potential measures in the area around the station to complement the inner redevelopment area. The simulation game then dealt with the instruments for implementing these measures. Eventually, we linked instruments from the so-called special and general sections from the German Building Code—respectively an integrated approach to regeneration with an option to apply zoning [32].

The Living Lab III “Photovoltaics and other renewable energies within the urban fabric—upgrading with urban renewal?” looked at the link between energy and urban renewal. It investigated how the energy transition should be dealt with at a small town level

and what role municipal utilities and public utility companies play in this process. It also investigated how energy-related urban renewal can be integrated into urban development strategies. Together with the municipal utilities, we held various discussions and workshops. Due to the significantly changed conditions during the research project, we did not carry out any simulation game in this Living Lab. Hopefully, newly introduced Municipal Heating Plans (the respective law was introduced in November 2023 on the national level, e.g., [33]) will take over the systematic role of connecting municipal development and (housing) energy renewal [34].

The Living Lab IV “Third places in the area—rural educational landscapes and social space-oriented infrastructure planning” examined the village of Lumpzig as an example. We used a charrette to identify potential buildings and open spaces that could be used as locations for decentralized social work, adult education, or local cultural activities—taking metropolitan discourses on Third Places (like reformed libraries as an inspiration to the countryside). We also discussed the ISDN topics with various secondary school classes in youth-oriented manner to draw conclusions for “growing up in town and village” and to integrate a young local people’s perspectives on energy and mobility transformation into the research. The aim was to analyze existing offers for further education, culture, and youth work and to identify the need for additional voluntary work. As a result, two simulation games looked at how small towns can manage the rural educational landscape and social space-oriented infrastructure planning from a structural and spatial perspective. They also examined how cooperation between different levels should be organized and which sectoral funding strategies can be used [35].

The results of the analysis and Living Lab phase were systematically documented and related to existing research work. This allowed both scientific contributions and concrete municipal approaches to be developed in the elaboration phase. For this, we conducted simulation games (see Table 2).

Table 2. Numbers of participants in living labs and simulation games.

Living Lab	Living Lab I Bicycle Traffic	Living Lab II Gößnitz Train Station	Living Lab III Renewable Energies	Living Lab IV Rural Educational Landscape and Socio-Cultural Infrastructure	
Number of Participants in the Living Lab	14	40	-	14	
Number of Participants in the Simulation Game	16	17	-	17	15

3. Fragmented Areas of Research—Together on a Mayor’s Agenda

Before we present results of the research, we will make a few remarks on different current debates in spatial development and urban planning, which we need as a background for the ISDN project, especially when discussing the transferability of the local results. In the 1990s, “sustainable development” echoed through academic halls and political speeches [36]. Nevertheless, it was not until the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the term gained a sharper operational edge. Global climate targets began to feel tangible, reflected in local policy frameworks and concrete infrastructure projects. It reflected more and more that climate-adaptive sustainability [37] strongly links to resilience. Kegler [38] proposed four resilience criteria especially tailored to (German) spatial planning. Of these, redundancy—having backups in infrastructure—proved vital. This means moving beyond the simplistic goal of meeting minimum service thresholds of *Daseinsvorsorge*. Instead, it emphasized integrated networks: schools coor-

minated with public transport, youth services linked to education centers, and regional branches or digital services extending the reach of urban institutions.

Resilience of a town like Schmölln in the peripheries is not only about enduring decline but also about managing unexpected surges, such as those experienced after 2015 with increased migration or the gradual aging of the population. Isolated infrastructure units often falter under such pressures, but flexible, multifunctional spaces—such as community centers or pop-up vaccination stores—can adapt more readily. In fact, the town’s experience with temporary solutions, like vaccine centers (2020 ff.) or interim refugee housing (2015 ff.), became templates for resilient planning. These were not mere reactions but deliberate strategies, designed to enhance local capacity. The future demands systems that could pivot quickly—robust, interconnected, and regionally anchored.

3.1. *The Urban Heartbeat of a Small Town*

Although Schmölln and Gößnitz are small towns, they pulse with a kind of rural urbanity. Gößnitz, with its critical rail connection to Leipzig and its broader *S-Bahn* rail network, embodies a new kind of mobility: the town as a transit node in a multilocal lifestyle [39]. Meanwhile, Schmölln’s demographic and socioeconomic tapestry has grown more diverse, challenging the outdated idea of uniform rural life.

Urban regeneration in Schmölln has been both careful and ambitious. The historic center has undergone sensitive restoration, preserving its medieval charm (Figure 4). Yet, not all structures were saved; a 1990s project retained only a historic façade. Today, this main supermarket remains centrally located at the market square, avoiding car-oriented outskirts. Schmölln shows regeneration efforts often start as grant applications, not as cohesive visions [40], limiting their transformational impact. The decline of traditional retail adds to the challenge. As digital commerce rises, city centers must adapt. Restoring buildings alone is not enough. Despite its small size, Schmölln offers well-used public spaces: pedestrian zones, cafés, and these *hygge* little streets European heritage is famous for. National funding like Urban Heritage (since 1990) and Active Centers (since 2008) has supported this preservation in many small towns. These lessons are not abstract. In Schmölln and Gößnitz, integrated development involves civil society: active citizens, local networks, and a strong link between the urban core and its hinterland. This synergy becomes essential in navigating the complex terrain between urban policy and rural resilience.



Figure 4. Market square of Schmölln (Lena Knacker).

3.2. Planning for the Regional Periphery

If towns such as Schmöln and Gößnitz represent the evolving face of urban life, their role in the regional structure is equally revealing. Schmöln enjoys solid train connections, while Gößnitz functions as the actual transport hub, with frequent trains to Leipzig and, in future, likely Chemnitz.

Yet this reality does not align with the official regional plan for East Thuringia. In fact, regional planning has gradually shifted away from its original developmental focus in terms of linear and punctiform infrastructure. Especially at the level of smaller towns—medium and basic centers—the designations have become symbolic [4,41]. While metropolitan regions rarely question their infrastructure, smaller centers often receive little more than catalog-based confirmations of services. If a rail is there, surely one finds it in the regional plan. It exists as a functioning *Daseinsvorsorge* as long as the respective state agency (of the 16 German states) orders trains on the menu. Local rail passenger transport is literally ordered in long-standing contracts between the state or its agency and the very railway operator. They operate *Daseinsvorsorge* by defining which trains with which cars will run at which interval, serving which stations. Spatial planning operates *Daseinsvorsorge* as providing the need to build or secure tracks like motorways—if an institutional actor wants to use it, spatial planning is fine with it. In a shrinking realm, one will not usually find new locations for education in the regional plan; all existent schools and comparable locations will be marked in the plan. However, if the county-based school development plan provides for the closure of a school due to demographic reasons, it will disappear functionally—surely, the buildings remain either abandoned or reused for different purposes. We do not criticize this; however, there are limits to an integrated understanding within a system if in a plan about *Daseinsvorsorge* only the tracks appear, but not the trains, or if the school locations appear, but not the schooling.

As Blotevogel [41] argued already two decades ago, spatial planning's impact on service provision is uneven. In East Germany, where planners have long dealt with demographic decline, the focus has never been on distributing more but on managing less [42,43]. Consequently, many innovative models of service provision emerge outside the official planning structure. These include “village shops” that combine retail with social gathering, “citizen buses” enabling mobility through shared resources, and decentralized healthcare like mobile nurses [18]. Each assumes the presence of a nearby town—an urban anchor—from which services can be extended, reconfigured, and sometimes transferred from state to citizen control.

Nevertheless, this duality—centralization in towns, decentralization in villages—creates tension. On one hand, towns rely on rural surroundings for their vibrancy. On the other hand, rural areas depend on the town for services. This mutual dependence can create political friction, especially when local governments must serve both spheres [3,43]. It raises a key dilemma: how can shrinking towns and villages, both situated at the periphery of regional planning, ensure adequate public services without falling into competition or neglect?

3.3. Rurbanism: Between City and Country

This dilemma leads us to a relatively new spatial perspective—rurbanism. In contrast to nostalgic visions of rural idylls, rurbanism acknowledges the reality: rural areas are increasingly connected, digitally literate, and socioeconomically diverse. As rail networks and internet access improve, formerly remote villages become part of global flows.

Institutions like the IBA Thüringen (International Building Exhibition) and academic programs in Weimar's Bauhaus University and Erfurt's University of Applied Sciences have embraced this shift—and served as a regional backbone for the conceptualization of a

research project in the same state. They explore how “town” and “country” might be fused into a hybrid space—what some call *Stadtland* [18,19]. This goes beyond categories. It offers a narrative for territories like Schmölln and Gößnitz, where urban and rural attributes must coexist.

Rurbanism does not present the countryside as a passive receiver of urban influence. Rather, it emphasizes local alliances—between municipalities and citizens—that allow for tailored, flexible solutions. Whether through small-scale projects or broader planning principles, this approach highlights the lived realities of complex, interwoven spaces. Langner and Frölich-Kulik [19] describe this as a rejection of simplistic binaries. Rural areas, they argue, are often portrayed as either idyllic escapes or sites of dysfunction. But in practice, they serve as testbeds for new forms of cooperation, solidarity, and resilience.

3.4. *Legacy and Learning from East-German Transformation After 1989*

No discussion of Schmölln and Gößnitz is complete without addressing their East German legacy. Recent societal and political debates rejuvenate the necessity to evaluate path dependencies of an East German self-understanding and development tracing back to the 1990s also on regional levels. Prior to 1989, this region was an industrial appendage of Leipzig—part of a dense network of coal, chemical, and manufacturing industries. The collapse of these sectors post-reunification led to economic hardship, followed by extensive outmigration and housing vacancies [9,44]. Yet this difficult history birthed innovation. The Eastern *Stadtumbau* program scheme (2002–2017), launched in response to massive vacancies, turned crisis into opportunity [7,45]. In places like Altenburg, bold experiments—like temporary uses for empty buildings—became part of a new planning ethos. The idea of “luxury of emptiness,” coined by Kil [45], suggested that decline can yield creative freedom.

These experiences are not just memories. *Stadtumbau*’s legacy is still valid in the national development policy. The ISEK as an instrument is a “child” of *Stadtumbau* and serves as a funding prerequisite for every *Städtebauförderung* as an option in the building code to formalize an urban development concept in §171a BauGB. Programmatic influence *Stadtumbau* had on one of the three program schemes of *Städtebauförderung* since its reform in 2019/20, the Sustainable Growth Regeneration. The people involved, the buildings reimaged, and the planning culture born from necessity still shape current debates. The urban shrinkage of the 1990s prepared towns like Schmölln for future challenges—such as climate adaptation—not through technological advancement but through accumulated local wisdom.

3.5. *Governance in a Changing Landscape*

Finally, the administrative structures themselves must be understood as part of the transformation. Schmölln was once a county capital—a status that has faded since reforms in the 1990s. However, the informally named Southern County refers to that. It comprises hardly more than the municipalities of Schmölln and Gößnitz, the by-them-administrated villages (altogether 19,000 inh.) and the small Verwaltungsgemeinschaft-Oberes-Sprottental with its 2,600 inhabitants and some villages of the Nobitz municipality. Schmölln itself incorporated villages between 1922 and 2019; especially the incorporations (they were separate contracts and procedures) revealed the already-changed face of the municipal administration. It is no longer a town administration alone but bears responsibility for a certain municipal rural territory with 46 settlement items—reaching from 500-inhabitant villages to small hamlets of only a few [16]. This shift also meant that *Daseinsvorsorge* tasks that have been an inter-municipal issue before became a complete intra-municipal issue. One striking example is Schmölln’s municipal kindergartens. The former “outside”

locations, like in Altenkirchen or Lumpzig, stayed Schmölln's responsibility but "shifted" into the municipal limits after 2019.

Yet these shifts reflect more than just boundary changes; they usually represent a slow withdrawal of state presence, a phenomenon Hannemann [44] drastically described already two decades ago as *de-Administration*—a kind of erosion of institutional infrastructure that went hand-in-hand with *deindustrialization*. In the ISDN project we showed how the incorporation into the municipal limits, into a single municipal administration, made decisions possible not until then—like the new kindergarten building in Altkirchen or the new doctor's office building in Nöbdenitz. It became an operational task for the municipal administration of Schmölln in the context of the incorporation of these two villages into it. There might not be an honorary mayor in Nöbdenitz or Altkirchen anymore—the local honorary politicians have their elected seats in Schmölln's municipal council—but the skilled "urban" administration of Schmölln made the new local infrastructure buildings possible.

This context matters. Without a strong administrative backbone, local development depends even more on civic initiative, regional coordination, and innovative governance. In Thuringia, repeated territorial reforms have reshaped not only jurisdictions but also identities, expectations, and capabilities.

4. Municipal Findings from the Research Project

As already explained in the methodology of the research project, the cooperation between science and practice allowed results to be generated at various levels. In the following, the municipal results identified for the towns of Schmölln and Gößnitz will be explained, followed by the transferable results for the development of integrated urban development concepts in small towns in the next section.

For the town of Schmölln, the Living Lab I on cycling [31] led to the development of specific small-scale measures that contribute to improving the cycle routes in Schmölln. For the example route to the nearby industrial estate, most identified improvements—such as signage, markings, mirrors, and removing barrier posts—can be implemented by the municipality. About 90% of the redesign consists of small, manageable measures. However, these need to be coordinated and framed as a recognizable urban development project. A major exception is the state road crossing, which requires structural changes needing a formal planning approval process. As an interim solution, a temporary pop-up structure could ensure safe bicycle crossing. Coordinating various administrative bodies helps streamline measures and processes. Still, several factors can delay implementation, such as reliance on subsidies, budget constraints, and tendering procedures. Moreover, room for interpretation exists in project justification. Early consultation with higher administrative levels could clarify requirements and help avoid delays or rejections, making the planning process more efficient.

The Living Lab II also allowed local insights into how to deal with the transport transformation challenges. The simulation game was used to discuss the possibility of creating a development plan for the area around the Gößnitz station [32]. This resulted in numerous conceptual approaches for the municipality that could improve the area around the station. A new building development at the station could create an entrance situation between the station and the center and create an urban character. We also discussed the reorganization and expansion of transport services for developing the station area as a mobility hub. The relocation of mobility services to the west side of the station opens up new potential for a pedestrian-friendly connection to the center.

Another focus was on developing the green areas along the Pleiße River into a coherent park and a green route for pedestrians and cyclists between the station and the center via a housing area in need of experiencing upgrading [21]. In contrast to many other small-

town train stations, where the focus is on urban integration, the Pleiße River can give the area with a high-quality design of the open space certain special amenity qualities and a characteristic spatial expression. Additionally, we examined the potential of zoning, whose justification derives directly from an integrated development concept and makes it easier to bundle steps of several planning procedures in a parallel, not subsequent manner. However, the validity of those ideas from our discussions depends on the outcome of the ongoing process of amending and reforming the national Building Code [46].

Two further simulation games focused on the organization of rural educational landscapes and social space-oriented infrastructure planning in small towns [35]. A simulation game explored how an existing school site could transform into a community school that also serves cultural, youth, and social work purposes. While urban models exist, rural areas face unique challenges, such as students spread across villages and limited mobility options beyond bus schedules—especially relevant for girls. The simulation revealed that local stakeholders face high hurdles in accessing the school building, as responsibility lies with the county. Involving the municipal administration—schools usually have county responsibilities—is one key to integrating the school with a local urban arena. Successful transformation requires cooperation between county and town administrations, school leadership, staff, students, parents, and welfare organizations. However, financial constraints, staff shortages, and legal barriers remain obstacles. To change perceptions of the school and assess local needs, the town could guest-host activities like children's festivals or flea markets on school grounds. These events raise awareness, engage volunteers, and promote community use. Visioning workshops with students and residents of Gößnitz can help generate concrete, low-cost ideas. This way, the school can become a place for all generations.

The other simulation game dealt with the urban sociocultural care at unusual locations in everyday rural life. In order to find out how a project- or location-based cooperation for a socio-cultural location could look by default, different scenarios for the establishment of meeting places were played out. It turned out that there is a consensus that socio-cultural offerings are a public and municipal task and should be offered by the so-called municipal family (County, *Amt* et al. and Municipality), as the municipality is closer to the citizens, knows their needs, and also has its own democratic forms of coordination and communication structures. However, users and the urban community should also be involved and take responsibility for social services. Examples of this are cooperatives made up of citizens who take responsibility for a neighborhood meeting place. It also became clear that combining social services with other uses is beneficial. Other uses can generate income in terms of economic efficiency. However, synergy effects can also be generated in combination with other public and commercial services, such as a 24 h-automatized food store or a daycare center. The spatial distribution of these services also creates mobility requirements and thus forms a potential network of locations for mobility hubs. It was also possible to gain findings on the organization of rural neighborhood centers. This showed that the operator logics should not be standardized (these result from different spatial logics or have grown historically), but that the municipality should assume the coordination function. The municipality must systematize the various operators and offers according to spatial characteristics or user groups. Digitalization plays a decisive role in this process. The use of apps or QR codes can simplify the process of “renting out” premises for honorary civic activities. For the municipalities of Schmölln and Gößnitz, this means that, in addition to a needs analysis to determine which target groups are currently being addressed and which other target groups can still be reached, the existing community centers must be better advertised in order to increase their frequency of use.

Overall, the research project has thus shown as a municipal outcome that, in addition to the municipal administration, a large network of stakeholders is involved in the planning and implementation of projects to safeguard and promote public services. An appropriate communication structure and instruments for coordinating interests are necessary to speed up and simplify the process. Nevertheless, administration also has room for maneuver in which it can implement various measures. It is particularly important to involve the political players at an early stage. Bundling several individual measures into an overall plan can also be helpful in order to justify small-scale measures or the use of existing urban regeneration instruments (development plans or festivalization). Pop-up structures, which can be implemented with little effort, are a suitable interim solution. The state level can also support municipalities in the planning and implementation of projects to safeguard and promote public services. Advisory services or guidelines can structure the approach. Projects can be implemented more easily through regular exchange.

5. Transferable Results—The Thüringen Readers

The Thüringen Reader trilogy, born from the ISDN research project (Integrated Strategy for Public Services and Sustainability), paints a layered and deeply place-based portrait of transformation in rural Germany. It was a purpose of the ISDN project to integrate research-based teaching (e.g., by supervising bachelor/master theses and doing on-site project-based teaching). We were able to compile research findings and revised student papers and essays from local practitioners. Eventually, there is no single ISDN, one single integrated strategy on *Daseinsvorsorge* and sustainability (the N in ISDN), but various approaches to think different things together on a local level. The continuous municipal task is to bring these approaches together into one specific urban/rurban/municipal strategy—however, to compile these things coherently into an ISDN. Insofar, the Thüringen Reader by ISDN represents such an effort of compilation, and we can use the next section to present highlights from the three volumes (available open access) that we consider noteworthy as transferable results from the transfer-oriented research. Each volume explores a distinct sector—public services, infrastructure, and social cohesion—and together, they form an integrated roadmap for rethinking rural development in the face of demographic decline, climate change, and structural transitions.

5.1. General Public Services

The first volume, “*Daseinsvorsorge*”, lays the theoretical and methodological foundation of the project [12]. It addresses the fundamental question: How can public services in rural small towns be made resilient, sustainable, and future-ready? Schmölln and its neighboring town, Gößnitz, are treated not as isolated settlements but as parts of a rurban Stadtland system. We argue—together with other actors [18]—that traditional planning categories like “urban” and “rural” are no longer sufficient. Instead, the lens shifts to territorial integration: small towns must act as both urban hubs and rural anchors.

This volume focuses on the institutional frameworks, the challenge of coordinating services across fragmented administrative structures, and the need for new regional governance models. It debates, among others, the challenges on public services by population decline, skilled labor shortages, and rural exodus in Thuringia (2nd chapter), gives insights into the consequences of administrative reforms for the planning levels and instruments below the state level (6th chapter), and proposes a competence center on rurban regeneration (7th chapter). It discusses innovative aspects of *Daseinsvorsorge* by presenting existent rural co-working spaces in Thuringia (4th chapter) and a campus for *Azubis*, young people in training comparable to a university campus—on the small town scale (5th chapter). Finally, it presents results from the analysis of *Daseinsvorsorge* cases we identified as part of the five

work packages from the ISDN project (3rd chapter, some of them, like kindergarten, school, and youth, are presented in more detail in volume III).

5.2. *Housing, Energy, Mobility*

The second volume takes a more technical and spatial approach and refers to three rather infrastructural sectors that deliberately comprise the title: housing, energy, and mobility, each of them a subsection of several articles of the volume [13]. Bearing in mind that there are scientific debates on whether housing is infrastructural or not [47], we consider at least the heating question as an important infrastructural issue—especially after the heavy political debates on the so-called heating law in 2022/23 (the Building Energy Act). Volume II explores how infrastructure—usually perceived as a neutral background—can become a driver of transformation when integrated with local governance and community participation. Through Living Labs and design workshops, we developed concrete interventions for energy transition (e.g., low-temperature heat networks, photovoltaic retrofitting, and sustainable mobility such as mobility hubs and cycling routes)—see above (e.g. 2nd chapter). Additionally, it presents results of the exchange with practitioners from local housing companies (5th chapter). In Schmölln, like in many small towns, a demographic shift has led to underused single-family homes and aging populations in mid-20th-century apartment blocks. At the same time, there is sustained demand for new single-family housing among younger families moving to the countryside. This tension between demographic realities, land use goals, and spatial planning raises questions about how to balance densification in rural villages with controlled expansion at the urban fringe. Public and cooperative housing providers play a key role in maintaining affordable and energy-efficient housing stocks.

In the field of energy, the research highlights that the technical means for energy transition—such as heat networks and photovoltaic systems—are already available and implementable. The challenge lies in planning, regulation, and local governance. Case studies on local heating solutions, such as a local “cold heating” network in one rather rural neighborhood and the use of wastewater heat in another, rather urban neighborhood, demonstrate the potential for locally tailored and ecologically viable systems (3rd and 4th chapter). However, the integration of these systems into urban planning remains insufficiently developed, and the role of new planning tools—especially the legally required Municipal Heat Plan introduced in Germany in 2023—has yet to be fully explored or synchronized with existing urban development instruments like the ISEK.

Mobility is addressed not merely as transportation but as a function of everyday life in rural regions. The project explores how infrastructure planning can better align with actual movement patterns of the people, particularly for those without access to private vehicles (the young and the elder as well as the less well-off). A key focus was the planning of a cycling route connecting the Schmölln town center with a nearby industrial estate (8th chapter), and the redevelopment of the Gößnitz train station into a mobility hub (11th chapter). These efforts aim to improve connectivity within dispersed, yet bike-manageable settlements and to enhance collective forms of transportation as viable alternatives to car dependency. The project recognizes, however, that in low-density areas with dispersed destinations, traditional public transport faces limits, and complementary systems like demand-responsive transit or ride-sharing schemes are necessary. Eventually one has to recognize the overarching difference between collective transport like buses or trains on the one hand, which need sufficient demand on high-quality routes to sustain (like the *S-Bahn* to Leipzig, the hourly train service between Schmölln and Thuringia’s state capital, or the hourly bus service from Schmölln to Altenburg, the county capital). On the other hand, there is individual traffic that reflects the dispersity of a rural realm—the

sustainability issue, then, is the choice between a bike, a car and other means; let it be traditional mopeds (Thuringia has been the production place of the famous 20th-century brand Simson) or even more traditional means like carriages. The consequential issue will be their drive and optional fuel—not their existence as functional means for a dispersed spatial realm. This stands in contrast to metropolitan spatial realms where the main issue is the space individual vehicles need to be parked in and thus blocking the public urban space.

Eventually, volume II sees municipal planning not just as a regulatory duty but also as a creative act of co-shaping a town's future. We call for planning tools that transcend sectoral silos, proposing hybrid formats like solar-oriented zoning and integrated heating and urban development strategies. The central thesis is that climate neutrality and spatial equity must go hand in hand—and that small towns, with the right alliances, can become exemplary actors in Germany's climate transition.

5.3. Everyday-Based Social Infrastructure

The third volume completes the trilogy by returning to the social fabric of rural life [14]. It asks: How can small towns ensure access to education, health care, youth services, and cultural participation in an era of austerity and aging populations? This volume places people and participation at the center. Schools, kindergartens, medical stations, and community centers are not simply buildings; they are spaces of belonging, identity, and democracy.

By highlighting the interconnectedness of social institutions and the urban-rural dynamic, the volume reframes social infrastructure as urban sociocultural care (2nd chapter). It suggests that the care for spaces—physical and symbolic—must be seen as part of a broader sustainability strategy based on a mutual foresight of a democratic municipality and its people. Tools such as Living Labs, participatory simulation games, and localized investment in village-level institutions show that cohesion and innovation are not mutually exclusive.

The publication delves deeper into thematic fields like youth services, education, and healthcare, also highlighting the concept of urban social cultural care—a term describing ongoing civic practices and infrastructures that foster social cohesion, local identity, and participatory democracy. An important innovation in this volume is the transfer of governance models from metropolitan social regeneration on a neighborhood level to small town contexts (3rd chapter). The volume closes with reflections on the notion of institutional continuity and the challenges of civic engagement in structurally weaker or shrinking regions. It suggests that infrastructure is not only a technical or economic field but also a space for community, culture, and democracy—a core pillar of modern rural development.

What ties all three volumes together is a relational understanding of territory. Schmölln is not only a case study; it becomes a laboratory of possibility, demonstrating how infrastructure, services, and culture can be reimagined in tandem. The ISDN approach is not about implementing a single policy but about building governance capacity—empowering small municipalities to navigate complexity with creativity.

At its core, the trilogy makes a quiet but radical argument: rural transformation is not about catching up with cities, but about developing alternative logics of development rooted in local strengths. Whether it's an old train station turned health hub (Figure 5), a kindergarten in a remote village, or a bike path connecting housing and employment—these are not marginal stories. They are the seeds of a new rural imagination, grounded in equity, ecology, and everyday life.



Figure 5. Doctor's office in former station building in Nöbdenitz (Arvid Krüger).

6. Discussion & Conclusions

6.1. Municipal Options and Success Conditions

The results show that even under difficult conditions—limited administrative resources, a complicated administrative theater, and a sometimes-confusing funding landscape—there are always options for integrating sustainability issues into a municipal urban development strategy. This can be achieved by addressing people's everyday questions: How do they get to work, to school, and even more—how do they get back, especially in the afternoon, to the places where they spend their free time and want to meet other people? What role do collective and individual modes of transport play in this process? This is a much more effective question in rural areas than the question of the sustainability of the drive system or what constitutes environmentally friendly mobility (i.e., walking, cycling, and public transport) versus car traffic in metropolitan urban discourses. If the cultural landscape becomes an energy landscape (wind, solar energy), this must fit into people's everyday lives if they need local heating alternatives to fossil fuels. Infrastructure planning in municipalities like Schmölln is a matter of urban sociocultural care. Sometimes this reveals itself in smaller issues, e.g., when the public utility company operates the swimming pool. Infrastructure planning requires actors who let themselves steer within local governance because it is part of their self-image: (Inter)municipal public utilities, special-purpose associations (*Zweckverbände*), and the public-benefit-oriented DBInfraGO, formed in 2024, are just as possible forms as cooperatives, which are already a traditional form of community action in predominantly agricultural rural areas. The case demonstrates that small municipalities can expand their operational scope when sustainability objectives are embedded in existing administrative procedures rather than treated as externally imposed agendas. The analytical contribution lies not in documenting success, but in identifying procedural configurations that increase institutional adaptability under shrinkage conditions.

For a municipal urban development policy, this means more consistently integrating infrastructure planning into an integrated spatial approach; using the established instrument of the ISEK appears to be effective—especially because many cities have used this instrument at least once in the last two decades to obtain funding. ISEKs can be more than just a funding prerequisite; they can serve as a strategic planning tool for small towns. Once initiated, an ISEK allows structured, participatory planning over several years. Originally

developed for East German cities post-reunification (as mentioned above), ISEKs have evolved into standardized, EU-backed urban policy instruments. Their strengths lie in identifying key intervention areas across issues and sectors. At least theoretically, ISEKs can integrate various funding programs and provide clarity on spatial priorities. In real municipal life, a more concise bureaucratic approach of higher levels on funding may be helpful, especially if municipalities prove that they already have an incisive urban-development strategy. Current discussions on the first chapter of the Building Code in parliament in 2025 may give a hint on that debate [46]. ISEKs or ISEK-based instruments can help coordinate actions across territorial entities, support community involvement, and enhance public spaces. One result of the transfer-oriented research of the ISDN project is the call for a stronger institutional and temporal alignment to realize the full potential of municipal development strategies.

The project thus also addresses broader topics that in Germany often fall under the label of small-town research [1] and which can only be touched upon here. Against the backdrop of demographic change, spatial polarization, and climate adaptation, small-town research has re-emerged as a critical notion in understanding regional dynamics and sustainable development [2,3]. We bear in mind the heterogeneity of small towns (Figure 6), ranging from shrinking industrial centers in East Germany and elsewhere in Europe (e.g., [6,17]) to growing periurban hubs near metropolises [48]. This limits the ISDN case to peripheral municipalities, although the governance approach is rather applicable in general, too—especially with regard to the link between infrastructural and urban governance and with regard to the dialogic orientation between municipal administration, civil society (and its everyday needs), and actors with a public-benefit orientation.



Figure 6. Schmölln's urban structure with industrial area and wind turbines in the background (Lena Knacker).

One key focus of small-town research lies in population decline, aging, and migration. Many small towns, especially in East Germany [42,49], are losing residents due to out-migration and low birth rates. This challenges local economies, infrastructures, and service provision. Close-knit civil society structures and relatively accessible political arenas [49]

often characterize small towns. Ensuring access to education, health care, mobility, and cultural life is a pressing concern. Small-town research examines how municipalities manage to provide these services under fiscal and spatial constraints. Many small towns find themselves between being central places and becoming peripheries [3,42]. Research investigates how they integrate into larger urban regions and how they deal with the risk of marginalization. The ISDN project contributes to these key issues of this field of research—from the very disciplinary perspective of urban planning procedures. From this perspective, we explored Schmölln and others as a laboratory of innovation.

Our Thüringen Reader serves as a compilation that is not a handbook at first sight; however, it gives insight into certain challenges many municipalities will face—and one possible way towards a solution we either simulated in our transfer-oriented approach with the approach of decentralized Living Labs and/or based on conceptual thoughts by students in various formats of research-oriented teaching. Eventually, the contributions in the readers show that peripherization and population losses are not a doom. They might become an opportunity for a post-growth society [37,42] as long as they enable an everyday life that relies on a self-governed *Daseinsvorsorge* and an eventual resilience against weather extremes or similar incidents that are the reason why there are climate adaptation strategies. To integrate *Daseinsvorsorge* and climate adaptation as part of a sustainability approach into a municipal urban development policy shall enable municipalities to integrate these issues into local governance to ensure that sometimes tough infrastructural decision-making does not come from the top down but is rooted in municipal decision-making. ISDN could not change the rules, e.g., the state-bound *Kommunalordnungen* (Municipal Ordinances), which say what municipalities may and may not decide—but it opened the path for how municipalities can decide if they may. Decision-making on the municipal level may—if well done—contribute to an everyday urbanism of a small town and an acceptance of a kind of hybrid governance where formal and informal structures co-exist in a close-knit manner. Doing so, their perspective may contribute to a better understanding of relational planning issues, placing the small town into regional, national, and global dynamics.

6.2. Beyond Schmölln: Disciplinary Contribution and Theoretical Implications

This article has examined how a small town in a shrinking region can expand its operational scope by renewing integrated planning instruments under conditions of demographic decline, fiscal constraint, and limited administrative capacity. Using the case of Schmölln in Thuringia, the study analyzed how sustainability objectives—particularly climate adaptation, mobility, housing, and socio-infrastructure provision—can be embedded within everyday municipal governance rather than treated as externally imposed agendas.

Responding to the reviewers' comments, we clarify that the contribution of this article does not lie in reiterating the well-documented structural transformation of Eastern Germany nor in formulating a normative program for small-town renewal. Instead, the analytical focus is on procedural configurations: how administrative actors, political representatives, and local stakeholders translate abstract transformation imperatives into context-specific planning practices. Demographic shrinkage and post-socialist transformation form the structural background of the case, but the research interest lies in how these conditions shape institutional decision-making and planning rationalities “on the ground.”

Methodologically, the combination of qualitative interviews, workshops, charrettes, surveys, and simulation games allowed governance processes to be observed across multiple scales. The revised manuscript provides greater transparency regarding stakeholder selection, analytical procedures, and data triangulation to enhance replicability.

While strongly anchored in the Thuringian context, the findings address challenges common to many peripheral and shrinking regions internationally: declining vitality,

infrastructural restructuring, aging populations, and the need to integrate sustainability within constrained governance settings. The study therefore contributes to urban and small-town research, landscape architecture and spatial planning, sustainability transition studies, and governance theory. It demonstrates that transformative capacity in shrinking regions does not depend primarily on visionary master plans but on the procedural integration of ecological, social, and infrastructural concerns within existing institutional frameworks.

Sustainable transformation in small towns is thus best understood as an incremental, governance-based practice embedded in everyday administrative realities rather than as a metropolitan innovation narrative. In the cozy streets of Schmölln, the kindergartens in the villages, and the availability of S-Bahn trains every 1/2 h from Gößnitz to Leipzig, the future of spatial development in Germany may be written. It is not a grand narrative of megacities and global metropolises but a nuanced story of adaptation, negotiation, and cooperation—between administration and citizen, center and periphery, town and countryside. Moreover, it may be precisely in this complexity that the most resilient, sustainable futures may be found.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BauGB	Baugesetzbuch (Building Code)
EAGF	European Agricultural Guarantee Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
IBA	International Building Exhibition (Internationale Bauausstellung)
ISEK	Integrated Urban Development Concept (Integriertes Stadtentwicklungskonzept)
ISDN	Integrated Strategy on General Supply and Sustainability (Integrierte Strategie für Daseinsvorsorge und Nachhaltigkeit)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

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