



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)

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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

The Regionalpark RheinMain

Frankfurt/Rhein-Main Region

1. Overview

Frankfurt/Rhein-Main is a polycentric region with settlement areas surrounded by open space (undeveloped green areas: forests, meadows and fields). Unlike many other European regions (take London or Paris as an example), open space is never far away. This is an asset that adds considerably to the quality of life because of the ecosystem services provided; people can enjoy attractive landscapes at their doorstep.

Within spatial planning this has been acknowledged for many years: Most of these areas are designated as *Regionale Grünzüge*. This should preferably *not* be translated as 'Green Belt' because 'belt' suggests a ring-like structure (like the Green Belt around London). Sometimes reference is made to a 'green cloth with holes' covering the core of the region, with the holes being the built-up areas.

Large parts of the *Regionale Grünzüge* are now part of the *Regionalpark RheinMain*, a new style of park designed to fit this specific urban landscape. At the heart of the park concept is a deluxe bicycle and walking network. Sign-posted paths form a 550 km bicycle-friendly network that is suitable for both long and short trips, and connects various attractions throughout the region (i.e., gardens or pieces of art, watchtowers, nature reserves, ancient monuments or river beaches, and so on). The dedicated ring route around Frankfurt alone is 190 km. The *Regionalpark* is marketed extensively with free high-quality maps, an interactive website with GPS tracks, and a year-round programme of events. In-depth information is available at two visitor centres and on the [Regionalpark RheinMain website](#).

2. Main Challenges

Plans Can Be Changed

You can't take for granted that an area forming part of a *Regionaler Grünzug* is protected from development. Authorities who have the power to designate the *Regionale Grünzüge* also have, of course, the power to modify their layout. There are competing land uses, and many of these green open areas would be attractive for housing and business for obvious

reasons: Frankfurt/Rhein-Main is a prosperous, dynamic region with high growth rates, and the spaces in question are close to urban amenities, to the airport, to motorways, etc.

Physical Access

Many of these green areas have never been formally designed to be accessible open space, but are the result of the transformation of countryside into a peri-urban area. This means that accessibility can be a challenge. Unlike in the UK, countryside and forests in Germany are open to the public, provided you stay on paths and country lanes. There are many existing paths and country lanes, but they do not necessarily form a network that is user friendly: links are missing, motorways or railway tracks form barriers, many paths are unsurfaced or muddy, and signposting is poor or confusing.

Mental Access

Open space in one of Europe's most dynamic regions is often treated as something that is simply "not yet developed" or as leftover spaces. Maybe more important, people aren't aware of the quality of this landscape. These are dangers within the competition for space: People need to learn about the assets of this open space, sometimes hidden, sometimes forgotten, sometimes known only locally. Additionally, we need to develop a modified notion of the beauty of a landscape, which might not fit the clichés of the times of William Turner.

Implementation Gap

Planners make plans and wait for somebody else to implement them. This is all right and part of the system; however, this system had been designed around building: building houses and infrastructure. After all, the name of the central law regulating spatial planning in Germany is *Baugesetzbuch*, the Federal Law on Building.

The *Baugesetzbuch* has its origin from 1960, the post-war boom period. The focus then was on enabling, encouraging and coordinating development. Also now, especially in prosperous metropolitan regions, investors do have an interest to build. But which private company would invest in publicly-accessible open space?

3. Main Insights

3.1. Insights related to the broad area of "network governance"

- > The governance structure of the *Regionalpark* is complicated.

This is caused by its history. It started in the 1980s when the towns of Flörsheim, Hattersheim and Hochheim faced considerable landscape damage in the aftermath of gravel extraction. Companies hadn't fulfilled their duty to re-cultivate the premises after the end of operations. These towns founded a company with the purpose to repair the damage and to also continue gravel extraction (and landfill) in a well-managed way. That

company was one of the stakeholders of the *Regionalpark* Pilot Project company, where the *strategy* for the Park and for the development beyond the three towns was conceived and implemented. Another key player in this development was the *Regionalverband's* predecessor, the *Umlandverband Frankfurt*.

For the *investments* beyond the three towns, a set of companies were founded, usually covering a group of towns and cities. In a later stage, the *Umlandverband's* role was taken over by the tailor-made *Regionalpark* company we know today (retaining the two-tier system of umbrella and implementation companies). Although legally private, all these companies are owned by public authorities from various levels. Accordingly, *Regionalpark* routes and *Regionalpark* places are located on publically-owned lands. Financing is provided by the owners of the companies and by sponsoring and subsidies (EU funds in the early days).

3.2. Insights related to mechanisms of cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation

In marketing terms, we might say that the *product* is in the focus, regardless of the nature of the contributors. In addition to landscape planners, there are specialists from forestry and agriculture involved, as well as from marketing, journalism, and the arts. This holds true also for the stakeholder organisations, which are usually local and regional authorities with a broad portfolio of responsibilities.

The *Regionalpark* team works with scientists, artists, authorities, land owners and landscape users with three priorities: a) Design and planning (placemaking, maintaining and amending the 'hardware'); b) Marketing (events, festivals, guided tours, visitor centres, maps and booklets); and c) Stakeholders (existing and future users of the *Regionalpark*).

3.3. Insights related to the role of (actual, potential) social, organizational, institutional innovations

- > Both the concept and its implementation have been innovative in that it has never been done before. There is still huge potential to use what has been achieved over the years for further innovations, for example, to better integrate farmers and farming.

There is a long way to go because some farmers are afraid of land loss, crop theft and damage. On the other hand, there now is an agreed cooperation with some 15 farmers and their shops, cafés, information or pick-your-own facilities.

- > Maybe it is time, after some 20 years, to try and make up the balance and to re-think the concept: Is the *Regionalpark* a means to secure open space and to counter land take? Is it an instrument for the peri-urban area or for rural zones? Is the focus on tourism and recreation? Is it about aesthetic aspects of landscapes or in instrument for regional development? How can financing be improved?

The *Regionalpark* could, for example, play a more important role in filling the implementation gap described above, by being charged with the realisation of open space designations in land use plans. There is a potential to use the Park as an instrument for channelling open space funds from different sources (e.g., greening of agriculture or biodiversity loss compensation). Land take - or the transformation of natural surfaces into artificial surfaces - has to be mitigated by biosystem improvements or by creating new natural surfaces. This is a well-established system but often performs below its potential with scattered creations at random sites. The *Regionalpark* could help invest these funds in a more meaningful and structured way.

4. Effectiveness Indicators

The *Regionalpark* is a success. It took the relatively short time of some 15 years from the beginning in the pilot project area (the three towns west of Frankfurt) to the completion of the 190 km ring route in 2010. The whole operation is managed by a relatively small staff with a moderate budget.

5. Illustration and further information

There is an excellent range of *Regionalpark* maps available free of charge. Details at <https://www.regionalpark-rheinmain.de/> (German)



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