

Article

Non-Formal Cultural Infrastructure in Peripheral Regions: Responsibility, Resources, and Regional Disparities

Lea Fobel

Department of Political Education and Education Systems, Leipzig University, Germany; lea.fobel@uni-leipzig.de

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Abstract

Non-formal cultural education (NCE) infrastructure has recently been at the centre of discussion regarding the promotion of equal opportunities as well as social cohesion and resilience. The German government strives to ensure equivalent living conditions, including access to education throughout the country. Although NCE infrastructure is considered a service of general interest, it is a voluntary service that districts are not obliged to provide. Research shows that NCE infrastructure provision and funding vary significantly between regions and that qualitative case analyses are needed to adequately contextualise key factors for the provision of NCE infrastructure. These developments and findings raise many questions against the background of spatially differentiated socio-economic landscapes. The article analyses two peripheral regions in Germany by examining key factors for the local provision of NCE infrastructure based on content analysis of qualitative interviews. This article aims to understand how NCE infrastructure is provided in peripheral regions to discuss the effect of these dynamics on the development of equivalent living conditions in Germany. The results show that citizens in peripheral areas have found alternative ways of providing NCE infrastructure due to the lack of financial resources available from the public sector. Self-responsibilisation, civic engagement, and individual commitment provide and sustain large parts of NCE infrastructure in rural areas. These developments impede the provision of equivalent living conditions in Germany while enabling a more resilient community through civic engagement. This article, therefore, provides an important contribution to the discourse on social and regional inequality.

Keywords

cultural education; cultural governance; Germany; living conditions; non-formal cultural infrastructure; periphery; social infrastructure

Issue

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1. Introduction

In Germany, education is unevenly distributed across regions: There is still evidence that the traditional stratified patterns of participation in education have not been completely eliminated (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021, 2022). On the one hand, this is due to the social stratification of educational opportunities. On the other hand, access to educational opportunities differs between regions because social (e.g., schools, libraries) and physical (e.g., transportation) infrastructure are unevenly distributed (Fobel & Kolleck, 2022; Weishaupt, 2018). With educa-

tional infrastructure being part of the effort to provide services of general interest, the public sector is obliged to promote sufficient educational infrastructure and assess the corresponding needs. However, the German districts (*Landkreise*) possess very disparate social and economic resources. Not least, the consequences of demographic change (e.g., ageing, out-migration) and new settlement structures (e.g., suburbanisation, commuter towns) challenge the provision of necessary infrastructure and complicate the tangibility of the population. At the same time, the importance of educational infrastructure, understood as social infrastructure, for the development

of a region is undisputed. Encompassing infrastructure of all types of education, educational infrastructure contributes to the promotion of local economies, creates jobs, trains skilled workers and, last but not least, is a central component of securing democracy (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021).

In the landscape of educational infrastructure, it is especially the cultural educational infrastructure which, in the form of libraries, museums, or art schools, provides important spaces of social infrastructure, fosters community, and creates more resilient societies (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021; Klinenberg, 2019, p. 16). At the same time, non-formal cultural education (NCE) infrastructure lies at the intersection of education, youth, and cultural policy and is thus provided by different political levels as well as different funding structures, resulting in a very disparate regional provision and accessibility (Fobel & Kolleck, 2022; Kolleck et al., 2022). Peripheral regions, in particular, are often faced with the task of prioritising their expenditure to cover all areas of communal responsibility (Grohs & Reiter, 2013, p. 199). Thus, either the structures are dismantled, or responsibility is handed over to independent non- or for-profit providers. In short, NCE infrastructure has enormous potential for personal and social development, strengthens social capital, and is an important component of social infrastructure. However, there are hardly any uniform and binding regulations to ensure basic NCE infrastructure across Germany (Sievers, 2018). Against this background and using qualitative secondary interview data as well as content analysis (Mayring, 2000), this article discusses the following research questions: How is NCE infrastructure provided in peripheral regions? What are the implications of these dynamics for issues of equivalent living conditions? To answer the research questions, the article analyses two peripheral regions in Germany by examining key factors for the local provision of NCE infrastructure. The analysis is followed by a discussion of the findings with regard to equivalent living conditions. This article aims to understand how NCE infrastructure is provided in peripheral regions in order to discuss the effect of these dynamics on the development of equivalent living conditions in Germany. Despite the pertinent and far-reaching effects that are associated with cultural education and social infrastructure, NCE infrastructure may not be equally distributed across regions. This article, therefore, provides an important contribution to the discourse on social and regional inequality.

The next section will discuss the conceptual framework used in this article, introduce the administrative background (Section 2.1), and highlight the challenges of NCE infrastructure in rural regions (Section 2.2), as well as current research on the topic (Section 2.3). Section 3 presents the data and methods chosen for this analysis before the results are presented in Section 4. The last section discusses the findings and elaborates on the implication for national and international contexts.

2. Conceptual Framework: Regional Cultural Governance and the Distribution of Social Infrastructure

Eric Klinenberg (2019) developed the concept of social infrastructure to describe spaces and facilities that help to promote and enable social and public life in settlement structures. According to Klinenberg (2019, p. 16), social infrastructure is defined as public institutions “that invite people to the public realm,” such as playgrounds and schools, but libraries or parks are also often overlooked and underfinanced, even though they play a major role in public resilience. This article understands the infrastructure of cultural education as a social infrastructure. Cultural education is then understood as any learning from, with, or through art and cultural objects or activities (Kolleck & Büdel, 2020). NCE would be any kind of institutionalised cultural education outside formal educational contexts, for example, in (adult) education centres, museums, or libraries. The focus of this article lies particularly on such facilities of NCE as a subgroup of social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2019), which is referred to as NCE infrastructure. Accordingly, NCE infrastructure is understood as social infrastructure, although social infrastructure as an overall concept covers many other areas besides NCE infrastructure. For example, NCE (author reading) takes place within the NCE infrastructure (library). NCE infrastructure is again part of the educational infrastructure that comprises formal (e.g., schools) and non-formal (e.g., libraries) infrastructure in the context of education in the area. All of these infrastructures are, again, social infrastructure. By looking at NCE infrastructure, this article, therefore, focuses on a very distinct aspect of social infrastructure.

NCE infrastructure is generally open to the entire population, irrespective of age, gender, nationality, level of education, or financial resources, and often offers spaces for encounters and social exchange (Klinenberg, 2019, p. 16). For example, libraries can be used by the entire population to access books or community spaces and do not impose any economic barriers. Museums or adult education centres also often offer the opportunity to attend events free of charge or based on a donation. With these properties, NCE infrastructure meets the characteristics that Klinenberg identifies for social infrastructure. At the same time, Klinenberg’s concept is linked to classical social capital theory (Putnam, 2001), as scholars agree that social capital, social networks, and the resources within and arising from them (Putnam, 2001) are of great social importance. However, Klinenberg criticises that the enabling (infra)structure, which is necessary for social capital to emerge, is not considered in capital theory. According to Klinenberg, social capital and social resilience can only be promoted if the corresponding infrastructure exists. As a consequence, there must be places where social capital can be generated, such as libraries or squares, before society can profit from its benefits. For this reason, social infrastructure is

needed. Nevertheless, Klinenberg remains rather vague about the implementation of his demand in the individual municipal (*Gemeinden*) and district budgets. A group of scientists has explicitly addressed this issue and developed a concept for ensuring the material and provisional basics of social life called *foundational economy* (Barbera et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2022). Similar to Klinenberg—albeit somewhat broader in scope—it formulates the demand for strengthening the provision of basic services and everyday (social) infrastructure. The approaches differ especially in their conclusions. While Klinenberg sees a particular responsibility for all levels of government to promote social infrastructure, the foundational economy approach aims at a transformation of politics and the development of a locally anchored and extra-political provision of innovative solutions for local economies (Rappen, 2022). These different perspectives illustrate very well the tension between emancipation and diffusion of responsibility in which NCE infrastructure currently operates and provide the framework for the discussion of the results.

Figure 1 illustrates the different analytical concepts used in this article. The concept of social infrastructure is particularly valuable to highlight the societal relevance of NCE infrastructure and to position the focus on NCE infrastructure within in broader scientific context. However, to analyse how NCE infrastructure is provided in peripheral regions from a governmental perspective, this article introduces the reader to the administrative concept of regional cultural governance. This concept already illustrates important processes and relations, but it fails to address regional specifics and challenges. Neither the concept of social infrastructure nor regional cultural governance can describe and analyse local dynamics in detail. To achieve this, the concept of the foundational economy is also integrated into the article, as this concept considers specific factors for a sustainable implementation of NCE infrastructure in peripheral regions. Against the background of the empirical context presented, it is evident that the promotion of NCE infrastructure is of great social importance. However, due to the economic situation of many municipalities, it can often only be inadequately developed. The concept of

social infrastructure, combined with the foundational economy approach, directs the analytical perspective towards the possibilities of providing NCE infrastructure in peripheral regions.

2.1. Administrative Background and Regional Cultural Governance

Most decisions on NCE in Germany take place at the regional level. Unlike many formalised aspects of governance, regional governance is the result of a critique of a highly hierarchised government. Regional governance aims to build loosely institutionalised and inter-municipal cooperation and network structures, often characterised by flat hierarchies and a high level of participation by non-state actors (Fürst, 2001, p. 370). Because NCE is strongly anchored at the district level, where it is decisively shaped, regional governance plays an important role in the context of NCE infrastructure. Regional cultural governance is a collective term for all governance mechanisms, forms, and levels that are directly related to the cultural sector or link it to other fields of action on a regional level (Knoblich & Scheytt, 2009, p. 68). Ultimately, regional cultural governance covers structures of control, regulation, and the interaction between actors on a regional level (Scheytt & Knoblich, 2009, p. 34).

Governance in the field of regional NCE engages with various actors from government, business, and civil society. Nevertheless, the public sector is of particular importance, as it provides many financing and sponsorship arrangements (Winter, 2019). Certain types of NCE infrastructure may be provided within the framework of child and youth welfare services, which districts are obliged to provide. For example, NCE can take place within youth centres or youth associations, either because associations themselves are cultural in nature or because occasional cultural activities are offered. However, such services are only accessible to certain members of society, in this case to the young population, and thus do not fully comply with the concept of social infrastructure. However, expenditure on NCE infrastructure, such as large cultural institutions (e.g., museums, theatres) or

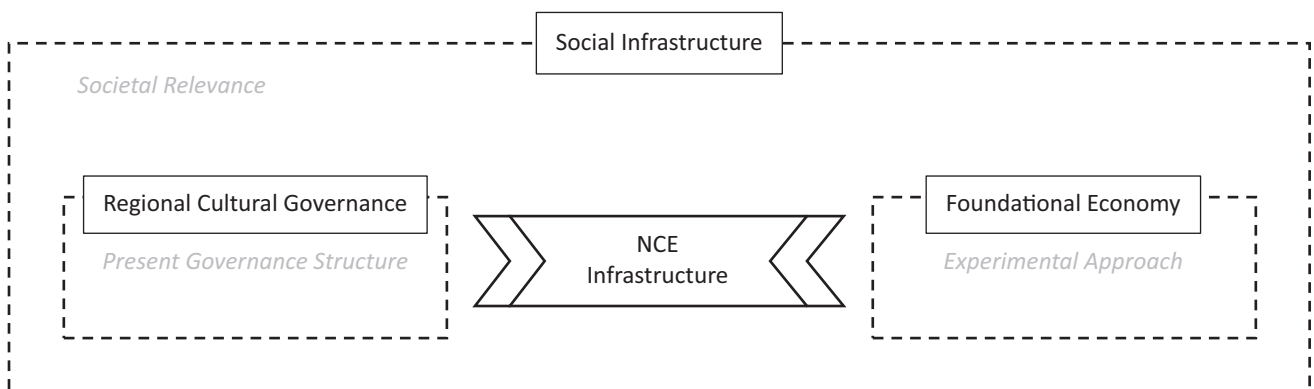


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

measures for their consolidation (e.g., coordination or planning offices), classifies as a voluntary service offered by the public sector, irrespective of child and youth welfare, and is therefore non-mandatory. Cultural industries and the private sector also play an important role in cultural governance by promoting and facilitating NCE privately or through public-private partnerships, e.g., private theatres and cinemas (Wiesand, 2006). In particular, private institutions provide jobs in the region, which enable NCE regardless of public funding opportunities. However, especially at the regional level and in peripheral areas, it is the civil actors without whom NCE infrastructure could not be provided. For this reason, public and private NCE infrastructure often go hand in hand with volunteerism and civic engagement (Winter, 2019, p. 195).

2.2. Non-Formal Cultural Infrastructure in Peripheral Regions

Peripheral regions are prone to scarce financial resources. In many cases, they have to cope with the consequences of out-migration, especially of young and highly qualified people, and the resulting ageing of the region and human capital flight (Maleszyk, 2021). Concerning the unequal development of central and peripheral regions, the government is faced with a particular challenge to create equivalent living conditions in Germany (Götzky, 2012; Küpper et al., 2013). The promotion of equivalent living conditions has been a declared goal of the federal government for more than 30 years, aiming at an equivalent distribution of resources and reduced regional disparities (Die Bundesregierung, 2021).

Education in Germany is a responsibility of the federal states (*Bundesländer*), which in turn have designated the districts and independent cities to identify and meet needs in the field of education. While this responsibility includes the provision of NCE infrastructure, it is only classified as a voluntary service of the districts. The already scarce resources of the districts are further reduced by the austerity policy of the federal government. Hence, these very voluntary services can no longer be provided independently (Wimmer et al., 2013, p. 39), and even the implementation of compulsory services shows regional disparities (Stolzenberg, 2018, p. 63). Since the districts often cannot afford dedicated, exclusive cultural departments, areas of responsibility are commonly combined and subsumed into larger departments. Local government support for NCE infrastructure also varies greatly between regions. On the one hand, the extent of support varies, and on the other hand, the means of support varies. Depending on the region, different means of support are used. Urban regions are more likely to have financial resources to support NCE infrastructure, while rural regions are more likely to provide material support in the form of facilities or equipment (Götzky, 2012; Seckinger, 2009). In addition, voluntary services do not necessarily have to be administered

by the local government and may as well be delegated to third parties. This includes private non- and for-profit providers, making NCE a market for which certain economic viability may exist. As a result, the provision of NCE infrastructure is marginalised even further within the public sector (Scheytt, 2013).

As a consequence, NCE infrastructure differs between regions (Götzky, 2012, p. 34; Küpper et al., 2013). While rather central areas tend to provide more traditional highbrow NCE infrastructure, such as theatres, museums, or concert halls, rather peripheral areas mainly facilitate lowbrow cultural education infrastructures, such as associations or small regional theatres. In peripheral regions—not least because of the low population density—demand is often not strong enough to finance the provision of larger NCE infrastructure (Otte et al., 2022, pp. 209–210; Wimmer et al., 2013, p. 30). Rather, it is frequently associations, donations, and private commitments which make smaller museums, theatres, and other NCE infrastructure possible. These association structures are usually supported by volunteers who devote their free time to providing NCE infrastructure (Le & Kolleck, 2022b, p. 334). In contrast to central NCE infrastructure, which is defined by a high degree of professionalisation (Deutscher Bundestag, 2005, p. 3), NCE in peripheral regions is characterised by voluntary and civic engagement (Götzky, 2012, p. 97; Schneider, 2014, p. 9).

2.3. Academic Discourse and Current Research

In the context of NCE infrastructure and regional differences, it is essential to understand the factors that shape the development of NCE infrastructure and how they vary between regions (Fobel & Kolleck, 2022). Cultural education research is increasingly promoted in Germany because the government considers cultural education infrastructure to be of great societal importance (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021; Kolleck et al., 2022). However, the examination of peripheral regions has often been neglected in scientific research and discussions. Nevertheless, there are relevant studies on cultural policy or innovations for the improvement of services of general interest in rural areas. Research is further complicated but also enriched by the diversity of disciplines involved (Kolleck et al., 2022). The field is often accessed from different perspectives and by different disciplines using different approaches.

Studies in spatial science tend to focus on the question of how services of general interest can be secured in rural areas in general. Researchers discuss the role of civil society in the provision of services of general interest concerning the state. Steinführer (2015) describes in her analyses how, in several rural regions, responsabilisation processes are the only way to secure services of general interest. Responsibilisation, interpreted as the process of becoming responsible, can develop externally or through the self (Steinführer, 2015). Depending

on the respective regional cultural governance structures, the public sector either explicitly seeks volunteers and establishes network structures or emancipatory bottom-up processes are responsible for ensuring that programmes and venues are created and established (Peters, 2005, p. 26). Self-responsibilisation of the population frequently occurs out of self-interest in securing or improving the quality of life, not least because voluntary and civic engagement has already developed into a central resource in peripheral areas (Le & Kolleck, 2022a; Steinführer, 2015). Moreover, social science studies indicate that cultural governance at the regional level is dependent on individuals and informal cooperation structures that, in turn, build on trust and personal relations (Le & Kolleck, 2022b). If a large part of NCE infrastructure is created through voluntary and civic engagement, on the one hand, initiators are needed to start the work or make it visible. On the other hand, studies (Götzky, 2012, p. 197) highlight that in local politics, the priority given to NCE infrastructure by the respective decision-makers is of great importance. Consequently, NCE infrastructure is often not structurally embedded in regions and local governments but instead is insecurely supported by individuals who individually assign great relevance to the issue (Götzky, 2012, p. 197).

In summary and based on these empirical results of past studies and the analytical framework, the following implications are the basis for deductive category formation: The economic situation of peripheral regions might hinder the provision of NCE infrastructure and could be the starting point for many conflicts over financial resources (Le & Kolleck, 2022b; Scheytt, 2013; Wimmer et al., 2013). Furthermore, studies show that governments may or may not support NCE infrastructure in many ways that are not always monetary but of material nature (Götzky, 2012; Seckinger, 2009). The third impulse from current research on the topic highlights that support can only be expected if the respective government values the purpose of NCE infrastructure and its relevance (Götzky, 2012, 2014). Finally, it is also a matter of supply and demand, especially in light of demographic changes, which is of particular relevance to the research question (Otte et al., 2022; Wimmer et al., 2013).

3. Data and Methods

How is NCE infrastructure provided in peripheral regions? To answer this research question, a qualitative secondary data content analysis of semi-structured interviews, according to Mayring (2000), was conducted. The data originate from the PaKKT project, which was funded from December 2019 to November 2022. The analysis in this article, however, was carried out independently and outside the PaKKT project. The implications of the challenges for the provision of NCE infrastructure for issues of equivalent living conditions are discussed in the conclusion.

3.1. Empirical Context

The data were collected in the PaKKT project in 2020 and made available for this study. The PaKKT project positions itself in the context of ensuring equal opportunities and sufficient education-related provision in rural and structurally weak regions. The PaKKT project aims at investigating the extent to which approaches to cultural education are characterised by an urban style and whether these approaches can stimulate the desired transformation and integration processes in rural areas. In particular, cultural education networks in very peripheral rural areas are examined under two aspects: On the one hand, the project systematises cultural education networks and the general conditions that promote or hinder their establishment; on the other hand, specific relationships are analysed on a habitual and milieu-specific level to assess transformation and integration potentials (Bender et al., 2019, pp. 66–67). The research design of the PaKKT project is twofold: While Sub-Project I investigates conditions for the success of social and institutional relationships in cultural education networks in rural areas, Sub-Project II reconstructs socio-cultural relationships at the level of latent structures of meaning, which are particularly relevant for a differentiated understanding of the opportunities and limits of cultural education (Bender et al., 2019, p. 70). This article uses data from Sub-Project I for secondary data analysis (for other PaKKT-related research, see Bender et al., 2022; Bender & Rennebach, 2022; Le & Kolleck, 2022a, 2022b).

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Of the four German municipalities in which the PaKKT Sub-Project I interviewed relevant actors of cultural education, two regions were selected for this analysis. Both municipalities are characterised by a very low population density, with less than 100 inhabitants per square metre. Migration statistics show that both regions are characterised by in-migration rather than out-migration in 2020. However, young people are significantly more likely to move away (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2022).

In the context of this article, 16 interviews were considered. They were conducted with voluntary and professional representatives of the local government, NCE practitioners from different disciplines, and other cooperation partners. The original data collection within the PaKKT project was based on theoretical sampling, and the interviews were transcribed according to the extended system of Dresing and Pehl (2018). The data were afterwards made available for this article. In accordance with Mayring (2000), the material was defined and characterised before the relevance to the research questions was established. Categories were formed deductively. Based on the literature presented, the categories were defined before working with the data and coding rules were established. During the coding process, anchor examples were documented until the codebook

was created. In the second step of the analysis, the data were reviewed again to revise the categories and finalise the codebook. In a final step, the material was reviewed one last time to correct any inadequacies in the codebook and to make the analysis as reliable as possible. Regarding the provision of NCE infrastructure, four sub-categories emerged at the end of the analysis: insufficient resources, government support, relevance, and supply and demand.

4. The Provision of Non-Formal Cultural Infrastructure in Two Peripheral German Regions

The following sections illustrate the provision of NCE infrastructure in two peripheral German regions using the four subcategories presented. For better comprehensibility, exemplary quotations from the interviews are included, which have been translated to English as closely as possible to the German original and slightly linguistically corrected.

4.1. *Insufficient Resources*

A frequently mentioned theme in many of the interviews is the notion of “insufficient resources” as one obstacle to NCE in peripheral areas. Interviews in both regions show that there is a lack of financial resources as well as time resources or personnel: “There [are] a lot of things that do not come about, that don’t work because there is either no interest or no money” (theatre artistic director). The theatre director’s quote illustrates that not only the funding of the NCE infrastructure is a challenge, but also the interest of the population in voluntary support of cultural activities. In the interviews, it is repeatedly emphasised that more engagement would be possible if the actors had more time available for the project. Both NCE infrastructure and municipal administrative structures indicate deficiencies, although a structural deficit in particular is seen concerning administration. While NCE actors and administration are under-resourced, the primary deficiency in local government is the provision of a central facilitator for cultural affairs, as this quote from a mayor shows:

And then we realised during the revision of the cultural development plan...that unfortunately there was a reduction in the cultural sector in the municipalities due to staff reductions and consolidation and that there were no longer any fixed contact persons for cultural providers [or] cultural actors. (Mayor)

This is partly due to the size of the municipality and the low population density. As a voluntary service, the available budget of the municipality must suffice to support the infrastructure in the region. However, it is not uncommon that the needs exceed the financial possibilities of the municipality, and priorities have to be set or reductions made: “If we don’t find a decision by then, i.e., no

way to continue [to finance] these sub-projects as an overall project [museum], we will either have to decide to continue with individual sub-projects and do without others” (Head of municipal School Administration and Culture).

In this specific example, the district had hoped for support from the municipalities or the federal state to ensure the funding of a museum, which remained uncertain for a long time. Overall, the interviewees frequently report austerity measures that have led to the reduction of staff or the closure of cultural infrastructure.

4.2. *Government Support*

In the case studies, the respective local government has the ability and the intention to provide voluntary services and thus support NCE infrastructure. Government support in the case regions, albeit sometimes insufficient, seems to be provided through monetary contributions as well as donations of material goods or (temporary) facilities, as this quote from a voluntary association member illustrates:

I would, for example, involve a [municipality] mayor...who also supports [us] very much.... Associations that have to make ends meet with membership fees also need help from time to time, even if it is a photocopier or the duplication of programmes and [so on]. (Association 1)

Overall, while local government has limited financial options, it is still frequently approached as a potential funding source. Local authorities are very aware of this issue and refer to higher levels to obtain funding:

Well, we alone will not be able to finance and promote any institutions to the full extent. So, there is always a need for further support from third parties, from sponsoring, from state and federal programmes, or from European funding. We are much too small as a city for that. (Mayor)

In addition to funding from local authorities, which can also be obtained through funding applications, subsidies from the state or the federal government can also be applied for. This also shows that the public sector sees itself as capable of financially supporting NCE infrastructure only to a limited extent. However, these higher-level sources of funding are rarely mentioned by NCE practitioners.

4.3. *Relevance*

In accordance with the literature, the analysis shows that the extent of support depends strongly on the relevance that local administrative representatives and civil actors ascribe to NCE infrastructure. Due to limited personnel, multiplex role structures, and few regulations regarding

NCE infrastructure, it is particularly significant when a local mayor or administrative personnel ascribe special relevance to NCE infrastructure:

But because we now, let's say...attach a different relevance to culture....I don't want to exaggerate it now and act as if we have now discovered culture for ourselves, but at least we have allowed ourselves to talk about it at all. And in the end...this idea came into being, and it is now actually becoming something [a new visitor centre]. (Head of municipal School Administration and Culture)

This quote from the head of school administration and culture illustrates how the relevance of cultural education in a region facilitates the conversations where otherwise only the costs and not the benefits would have been considered. Although, in this case, the relevance of NCE to a collective has changed, it is often individuals whose strong commitment to NCE promotes the very infrastructure. NCE practitioners particularly benefit from the increasing relevance of NCE infrastructure when individual concerns are promoted and addressed by personally interested and, therefore, committed administrative staff: The establishment of a bus route to the theatre "succeeded because...people were sitting in the office who simply understood this very well" (Theatre artistic director).

These examples already illustrate the great relevance of NCE in the administrative system in general but also among individual stakeholders. As expected, the interviews confirmed that a large part of the work for NCE infrastructure is unpaid and relies on individual commitment. The provision of NCE infrastructure is dependent on local individuals: "Most of the people [active in the network] are volunteers who sometimes have other jobs, [and] do this work on the side, alongside their other jobs" (Museum network).

At the same time, however, the interviews highlight that this is engagement through civic bottom-up processes in which citizens were keen to participate in a self-determined manner in the development of their region, as this citation illustrates:

The [city] has...sought to preserve as many of the cultural institutions as possible, and so there were also associations that...were founded [by] citizens from [the city] and from the region. And then they thought, where can we all participate, where can we maintain facilities, where is it necessary to bundle social forces and so on? (Mayor)

In addition, voluntary workers even demand that more citizens help support the local NCE infrastructure. This illustrates the high level of self-responsibilisation in the region. Even if not all people participate, those who consider it a civic duty to provide voluntary support: "And I would actually like others to take time for this, oth-

ers who also do voluntary work like this...[and] that others...feel responsible" (Association 1).

Evidently, citizens themselves feel responsible for developing and maintaining NCE infrastructure, even if they might ask for support. At the same time, the interviews highlight that the promotion of NCE infrastructure on behalf of the government is only a voluntary service that can be pursued at its own discretion. Only if NCE is given a high priority will expenditure be prioritised accordingly. Thus, there is always a need for an initiator who launches a certain NCE project and meticulously pursues the related objectives. If the structures change in such a way that this person is no longer available and or there is no (equally committed) successor, then the projects also cease to exist. A member of the association reports on the importance of individuals for a project, as projects often fail when there is a change of personnel within the cooperating institutions: "Many retire...and when new ones come along, and I ask, [they say], I don't know anything, and that...I don't know anything about it and...they are not introduced to this topic at all" (Association 9).

This statement illustrates that knowledge and meaning are strongly dependent on individuals and that individual and informally regulated commitment can only be handed over to successors with considerable difficulty. It also highlights the importance of individual commitment and the relevance ascribed to the issue. Only if the relevant information is passed on to the successor and the importance of NCE is firmly anchored administratively, the respective infrastructure can be maintained. Otherwise, other issues have a higher priority, and NCE infrastructure remains neglected and marginalised.

4.4. Supply and Demand

The last sub-category thus directly ties in with another aspect of the provision of funding for NCE infrastructure in rural areas: supply and demand. The interviewed practitioners of NCE highlighted that, in addition to public funding, membership contributions, as well as tickets to events, are the main sources of financial support: "So, the museum is also heavily dependent on visitors....We also had building measures, [so that] the last year basically passed with building measures" (Head of municipal School Administration and Culture).

At the same time, some NCE practitioners mention the intention to make access to NCE infrastructure as inexpensive as possible for those interested, to enable as many people as possible to participate. However, it becomes clear in the interviews that the costs for individual events can only be covered if the participants' contributions are increased. An increase in contributions or admissions would, in turn, result in making participation more difficult and fewer people would be able to participate:

Then we tried it, and...our participants also paid a good amount. So, it's not our fee, but for the person

who gives the lecture, so he also gives a great lecture....That's really something really great, exciting, who's really interested in it, but of course, it's, first of all, a considerable contribution to the people from our region. (Association 9)

On the one hand, this is because, for example, the invited speakers demand their standard honorarium, and the often voluntary structures in the area cannot cover the costs themselves. On the other hand, NCE infrastructure does not seem to be very popular. Practitioners report on various cultural programmes that are not attended sufficiently by the population:

And many here in our area [are] not [involved] at all...and don't want to be. And this offer, we have such a huge variety of offers in the whole [region] and also in [city], and it is not really taken advantage of. (Association 9)

According to the interviewees, one particular reason for this is the advertising of the events, as the rural population has to proactively search for programmes to find them since there is no central distribution for advertisement.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article addresses the question of how NCE infrastructure is provided in peripheral regions and of the implications for equivalent living conditions. Against the background of Klinenberg's reflections on the importance of social infrastructure for social resilience and cohesion as well as cultural regional governance in Germany, these questions are answered with the help of semi-standardised questionnaires and qualitative content analysis across two peripheral German regions.

The analysis shows, in line with other studies on cultural policy in Germany, that NCE infrastructure is tied to individuals. If NCE is not a compulsory task of the municipalities, dedicated citizens are needed who intend to shape services of general interest in their region. Of particular importance are either committed individuals who become—voluntary and unpaid—central actors in the context of NCE in the region and drive the provision of NCE infrastructure or interested and sensitised people in critical administrative positions who overcome bureaucratic hurdles and enable public support. Overall, there seems to be a high level of responsibility in the regions, which mainly originates from the citizens themselves. Within the two peripheral regions, there is an understanding that NCE infrastructure can be designed by the citizens themselves and that there should be volunteers. The analysis also shows that the public sector, at least at the local level, has few financial resources to contribute to the promotion of NCE infrastructure. Rather, third-party funds can be raised at higher levels of government or from foundations. Many

NCE infrastructures also try to finance themselves with admission fees alone. However, participation in cultural education is still strongly influenced by socioeconomic variables. Children of parents with higher degrees, in higher secondary schools or from families with greater financial resources are more likely to participate in cultural education than their less privileged peers (Fobel & Kolleck, 2021). The problem of NCE infrastructure is, therefore, not limited to the physical provision of NCE infrastructure but also includes social barriers to participation. Consequently, any pricing of NCE infrastructure or programmes raises barriers for many people and makes it increasingly difficult to participate equally in cultural education.

Nevertheless, the frequently mentioned issue of increasing privatisation cannot be identified in the regions despite many austerity measures. Although some associations cover their costs through admission fees, and there are also small private theatres in the regions that renounce public funding, a large part of NCE infrastructure is still covered by voluntary and non-profit actors. What seems to be lacking, however, are sustainably and structurally anchored individuals who are responsible for the field of NCE infrastructure at the administrative level and guarantee support as a contact person to enable long-term provision. This raises the question of responsibility in rural regions. Although NCE infrastructure is provided locally, the financial, time, and material costs are often borne by those active in the community. While in financially advantaged and densely populated regions more funds are available to provide NCE infrastructure as voluntary services, citizens in peripheral and financially disadvantaged regions become active themselves. Klinenberg (2019) also takes up this debate and holds the state responsible for prioritising the provision of social infrastructure, just as it has done with physical infrastructure for decades. It is important to note that citizens are not explicitly obliged to volunteer by the state or the local government. Civic engagement, at least in the regions analysed, is a self-determined transfer of responsibility based on experienced necessity and thus should be seen as a coping strategy for dealing with a shrinking or insufficient supply of services of general interest (Steinführer, 2015, p. 15).

Regardless, the question arises as to what extent these engaged citizens relieve the public sector of the responsibility of providing services of general interest. This question is related to the debates about the foundational economy mentioned above. Although the foundational economy approach proposes radical changes to the system at this point, a conservative interpretation could be applied. One way to share responsibility between citizens and the local government would be to co-produce municipal services of general interest. By doing so, the full responsibility of provision is neither on the citizens nor on the local government. Rather, both the planning responsibility and the service provision lie equally with all parties (Rappen, 2022,

p. 274). In the context of NCE infrastructure, one possible co-production model is networks in which municipalities, civil society actors, and the business community work together, each contributing their own expertise and resources (Rappen, 2022, p. 290). This allows for an improved agreement on the management of resources and the diverse know-how of the different non-municipal actors to be utilised. In accordance with other research on the topic (Rappen, 2022, p. 295; Steinführer, 2015), the results of this study indicate that co-production in this sense can be sustainable if there is sufficient and reliable municipal support and the local social capital is sufficient. But what are the consequences of a heterogeneous and regionally specific development of co-production as an instrument for securing equal services of general interest? First of all, the expense of long-term and reliable support for co-production projects on the part of the local government should not be underestimated, as a lack of personnel and financial strength, in particular, are ultimately at the root of these considerations. Secondly, the unregulated development of local co-production and negotiation processes could lead to further differentiation of the quality of life in disparate regions and equal living conditions being pushed further into the background (Steinführer, 2015, p. 15). In either case, local social capital is needed both for civil society projects and for measures co-produced by municipalities, businesses, and civil society. Against this background, neither option offers an unconditional solution for peripheral regions that are subject to out-migration and ageing. However, if these projects were supported by significantly increased funding programmes from federal and state governments, which would have to be accompanied by a corresponding prioritisation of cultural education and social infrastructure, the responsibility could be shifted.

Even though this article analyses the issues of social infrastructure provision in the example of cultural education and the national context of Germany, the results are important for the international context. The relevance of cultural education for individual and societal development is recognised and discussed internationally (Winner et al., 2013). In addition, the challenge of shrinking and ageing peripheral regions, especially those outside the perimeter of larger agglomerations, is not limited to Germany but is evident in many countries around the world. Thus, a discussion on responsibility and distribution of resources is of great importance globally, especially considering the increasing tendency towards political radicalisation, particularly in rural areas (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2020). Due to the decrease in financial and social resources in rural and peripheral regions, NCE infrastructure is particularly affected. Accordingly, the role of citizens in maintaining these necessary basic structures is being discussed internationally (Freiberger et al., 2020). This article can deepen the international discussion on the role of the nation-state in the provision of services of general interest and sensitise to the chal-

lenging financial structure of individual aspects. At the same time, the contribution follows up on important reflections on the relevance of the welfare state and the responsibility and role of citizens.

What this article is unable to cover are the structures of cultural education networks as they have been explored in other studies (Le & Kolleck, 2022a). Networks represent important opportunities for co-production and have great potential in supporting NCE infrastructure. Research on the conditions for the success of these structures would consequently be of great importance for the provision of cultural education (Le & Kolleck, 2022b). Equally important would be case studies that demonstrate how co-production can be effective in financially disadvantaged regions or illustrate international best practice models. Another challenge of this research is the data protection regulations, making it impossible to include a detailed description and analysis of the regions studied.

This article shows that, at least in some peripheral areas, it is certainly possible to develop social infrastructure through civic engagement, which already promotes community in the sense of social infrastructure through the communal effort in the provision alone. Co-production in these regions could be a way of sharing the responsibility of providing NCE infrastructure between community, business, and civil society. At the same time, both the ideas of Klinenberg (2019) and this study are linked to the issue of stratified participation. Cultural education, especially in the non-formal and thus voluntary domain, is still not equally accessible across social strata. For only if NCE infrastructure is provided across regions and utilised throughout all social strata can the population benefit equally from the positive effects.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Lea Fobel is a research fellow at Leipzig University in the project “Cultural Education in Rural Areas.” Previously, she worked at the Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development in Dortmund after obtaining her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in sociology and population studies in Bielefeld, Cologne, and Groningen. Her research focuses mainly on spatial and social inequality as well as social participation.