



© Frauke Heidtmann

## **Interview: Jutta Schiecke**

State Commissioner, Office for Regional Development Lüneburg

### **Project Newsletter RUMORE, Nr. 1**

September 2017

#### **1) The project RUMORE aims at strengthening innovation capacities by fostering rural-urban cooperation and partnerships. What is the significance of this topic for the Region of Lüneburg and for the work of the Office for Regional Development?**

The Region of Lüneburg should be considered as an in-between area. It directly borders the major cities of Bremen, Hamburg and Hanover and consists of economically less strong rural areas, the core city of Lüneburg and peri-urban areas. While Bremen, Hamburg and Hanover are home of several universities, research institutions and colleges and possess high attractive forces, there are only a few academic institutions in the rural areas of Lüneburg region. At the same time, the economy in Lüneburg region is characterized by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It is essential that these SMEs receive the opportunity to access up-to-date knowledge and new technologies to be able to withstand the increasing competitive pressure in the market. Presently, knowledge is often generated in urban more innovative areas, so it is important to support knowledge transfer between different parts of the region and to promote the generation of innovative ideas.

Against this background, the Regional Action Strategy for Lüneburg Region defines regional disparities and knowledge networking as two out of five critical factors for the future development of the region. Thus, these two issues are working priorities for the Office for Regional Development Lüneburg (ArL), a subordinate body responsible for regional development in the district of Lüneburg. That is, among others, responsible for the regional coordination and implementation of the ERDF and ESF.

An important factor for the development of Lüneburg is the participation of several counties in the Metropolitan Areas Hamburg, Hanover or North West. The development of these counties is in many ways linked to the developments in the core metropolitan cities of Hamburg, Hanover and Bremen.

To sum up, the questions tackled by RUMORE are perfectly matching the working priorities of ArL and the key challenges faced by the region of Lüneburg.

## 2) What advantages could result for the Region of Lüneburg from improved rural-urban partnerships in the field of innovation and what types of partnerships are especially needed in your region?

Neither urban cores nor their surrounding areas are able to solve regional challenges on their own since the interconnections between them are too multi-layered and complex. Many public tasks can be fulfilled more efficiently when they are aligned between core cities and surrounding areas. In Lüneburg region this is already functioning well in several different contexts. Yet, cooperation in the region could significantly benefit from involvement in the process of stakeholders from the private sector such as local enterprises as well as of research institutions. This will among other things significantly strengthen the region's innovative potential. One example: Only a few colleges, universities and research institutions exist in the region of Lüneburg and almost none of them are located in the peripheral rural areas. To enable rural areas to keep pace with technological progress and to compensate locational disadvantages for enterprises that

might arise from large spatial distances to the next university or research institution, it is important to support partnerships, cooperation projects and networks between research institutions and universities on the one side and enterprises and stakeholders outside of cities on the other side. The improved access to knowledge, research and development is particularly needed to ensure competitiveness of the local economy, preservation of jobs and introduction of sustainable practices in agriculture or small industrial companies. The potentials of cooperation projects and networks going beyond administrative borders, for instance between a technically oriented university in Hamburg and SMEs in the rural parts of Lüneburg region, should be further explored. These should receive targeted support in order to increase the innovation capacity of the whole region.

## 3) How could the cooperation between stakeholders from urban and rural areas in your region be strengthened and what are the main obstacles that hamper current cooperation efforts?

A lot of well-functioning cooperation approaches and practices between stakeholders from urban and rural areas already exist in the region of Lüneburg.

Currently, there is a good cooperation in the bodies of the Metropolitan Areas of Hamburg, Hanover and North West as well as beyond them. Nevertheless, in my opinion two main obstacles hamper cooperation efforts in the region.

Firstly, stakeholders in the core cities and in surrounding rural areas often do not know from each other. A small company located an hour away from Hamburg might have potential for improvement in production while

researchers in Hamburg working in the same field could look for application possibilities for newly developed software. Yet, company and researchers often do not know from each other and this is an everyday situation.

To establish thematic networks, platforms or online tools to help stakeholders get to know each other better and establish contacts could be a way to increase and improve cooperation in the region. Some online tools and networks already exist, but there could be more of them and they could be better known.

Secondly, Hamburg and Bremen are different federal states with own administrations and in parts different funding possibilities. This

makes promotion of cooperation projects not an easy task and necessitates close cooperation between different levels of administration. Projects with partners from more than one federal state need to be facilitated and better supported, also in terms of financial support. This is already happening, but I believe there exists room for further improvement.

A good example how the cooperation between stakeholders from urban and rural

areas could be strengthened is the Fund for the Metropolitan Region Hamburg. All federal states participating in the Metropolitan Region pay proportions into this Fund. The collected funds are used to support infrastructure, tourism or nature and landscape projects that are making a contribution to the development of the Metropolitan Area.

#### **4) Can you name some successful innovation delivery projects from your region that are good examples for integration of rural areas in innovation chains and for transfer of knowledge between different regional actors?**

Various successful activities by different stakeholders were and are undertaken to improve the economic situation in Lüneburg region and to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of the economy. Several activities that focus on innovation transfer should be highlighted.

Ten counties in the region of Lüneburg belong to the ARTIE network. ARTIE is a union for innovative oriented economic development in North-East Lower Saxony. The member counties of the ARTIE network jointly operate TZEW (Innovation Transfer Centre Elbe Weser), a transfer centre helping and advising SMEs in the field of innovation. Since 1999, ARTIE and TZEW are successfully organizing and supporting active, demand-oriented knowledge and technology transfer, especially for SMEs in rural areas, and have hereby helped many SMEs in the region. In addition, they are engaged in various cooperation projects supporting the delivery of innovation. Currently, TZEW is participating in the Counsel

Tour Industry 4.0, a cooperation project with focus on digitalisation run by TZEW, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Innovation Network Industry 4.0 Lower Saxony and others. The Counsel Tour Industry 4.0 is a perfect example showing that projects are particularly successful when different partners are effectively working together and mutually complement each other.

Another project which should be mentioned is the Lüneburg Innovation Incubator. It is a research-driven project for regional development, in the framework of which the Leuphana University Lüneburg and the German federal state of Lower Saxony strengthened the research and economic potential of Lüneburg via various subprojects, such as the establishment of innovation and transfer networks and different kinds of practical projects for students. The total project volume amounted approximately 100 Million Euro.

## 5) How are innovation delivery projects in Lüneburg Region currently supported by the Lower Saxon Multi-fund Operational Programme and what potentials for future improvement of the funding instrument with regard to the rural-urban thematic do you see?

The first out of nine priority axes within the Lower Saxon Operational Programme is “Support for Innovation”. This priority axis integrates several funding guidelines designed to fund innovation activities or innovation transfer such as projects by universities or different kinds of innovation networks or innovative projects in SMEs. The majority of the existing funding guidelines focus on supporting cooperation projects with the involvement of different partners from the region.

The results obtained so far show that Lower Saxony is already well-positioned with its Multi-fund Operational Programme.

Nevertheless, the two big border cities Bremen and Hamburg do not belong to Lower Saxony and have therefore their own operational programmes with own funding guidelines. This is nothing I want to call into question, but for parts of Lüneburg region it is a shortcoming that the funding guidelines are normally only supporting activities and projects within the administrative borders of the own federal state. When stakeholders from more than one federal state are involved, it proves complicated to provide or obtain funding and thus to implement projects. Unfortunately, this concerns in particular cooperation and networking projects.

## 6) What are your expectations from the participation of Lüneburg Region in the European project RUMORE?

RUMORE gives us the opportunity to discuss relevant regional questions in depth and with international partners and, equally important, to stimulate a debate among stakeholders in our region. I am pleased to say that we were able to start this process during our first local stakeholder group meeting in April 2017. With almost 30 representatives of colleges, chambers, and economic development agencies we had a fruitful debate about possible actions and approaches with importance for our region.

I believe that from the interregional exchange we will be able to generate new ideas for the region of Lüneburg. The challenges the regions in Europe are facing are not unique. While the surrounding circumstances might be different, there is still a lot regions can learn from each other. In this sense, my colleagues and I are looking forward to the international exchange and cooperation within RUMORE. We are curious to know which approaches exist in the other partner regions and in learning from them on possibilities to improve rural-urban partnerships and innovation in Lüneburg.