

IASS-Blogpost

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Projekt: Regional Sustainability Transformations

[Dachzeile]

Research, accompagny, transform: Our research project on structural change in Lusatia

The BMBF-funded accompanying research project "[Social Transformation and Policy Advice in Lusatia](#)" at the IASS is coming to an end after almost four years. In the early stage of the coal phaseout, the aim was to determine together with actors in the region how structural change can succeed in a fair and democratic way. Parallel to the start of the project in 2018, the "Kommission für Wachstum, Strukturwandel und Beschäftigung" (Commission on Growth, Structural Change and Employment – KWSB) took up its work at the federal level and the "Zukunftswerkstatt Lausitz" (Future Lab for Lusatia) started in Lusatia.

Four years later, the federal and state governments have developed a strategy for structural change, and subsidies are coming in. Thanks to participation and visible initiatives, the fear of change is beginning to give way to a spirit of optimism – though not everywhere. How Lusatia's structural transformation will be shaped is also a question of political culture. Whereas in Saxony funding for initiatives is supplied based on criteria such as job creation, the importance of the project for the economic structure, and the project's contribution to achieving German climate mitigation targets, Brandenburg takes a more participation-oriented approach.

With the following seven theses, we spotlight some of the findings from the research we conducted in this stormy field. We have closely linked [transformation research and transformative research](#) in order to not only observe processes, but also to work together with the actors involved. The links refer to the respective texts:

1. The federal financial assistance proposed by the KWSB and enacted in the Structural Development Act provides Lusatia with significant resources that enable the region to set the course for the future. However, the resolutions also show that it is [not system change that is being strived for, but rather a continuation of the export-oriented industrial model](#). And in this model, [the interests of labour and capital take precedence over the environment](#). [Other countries have been more successful at](#)

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[involving local stakeholders in the work of such commissions](#) to acknowledge their views and interests.

2. While regional and local participation processes did deliver valuable results and strengthen a feeling of togetherness, too few Lusatians were reached by these processes (see [Zukunftswerkstatt Lausitz](#)). Precisely because there is serious concern that [structural ruptures similar to those that occurred after 1990 could be repeated as well as significant scepticism toward political elites](#), state actors at all levels must expand opportunities for participation. Structural change needs people on the ground.
3. Our studies with [children, teenagers](#) and [apprentices](#) show that the clear majority of them are motivated to get involved in their own community and region. So far, however, they have received little information about structural change and have few opportunities to participate. Having said that, there are plans in Brandenburg to create such structures. We propose involving [young people in participation processes](#) so that they too can develop political priorities, experience self-efficacy, and help shape the region. Their decisions to stay or return will ultimately rest on whether new dynamics are developing in Lusatia.
4. For Lusatia, the coal phaseout means making a significant contribution to climate protection that will be financially compensated. Yet the industrial imprint reaches deep into Lusatians' geographic, social and mental structures. Despite the significant burdens imposed on the region by coal-mining (including open-cast mines), many in the region had come to terms with an industry that was needed so that ["smartphones in Berlin"](#) can work, as a mayor of one Lusatian municipality put it. The loss of societal recognition for this is perceived as threatening and cannot be compensated with financial support alone.
5. In Lusatia, as in other areas, there is a tendency toward right-wing populism. This is not only directed toward migration and societal liberalisation, but also embraces the defence of existing ways of life which are based on the very unequal and also power- and [domination-based appropriation of nature](#). Right-wing populists seize on experiences of devaluation, deny man-made climate change, and defend a way of life based on the exploitation of nature and people in other parts of the world.
6. Structural change isn't just beginning today or even in 2038: It has already been taking place for a long time. Many younger (often female) people are creating new points of reference, living and working differently, and really shaping change. ["We're already doing it"](#) is the local motto and a resource for making the political agenda of structural change a societal task. These potentials from the region itself are helping to make Lusatia more diverse.
7. As researchers, we were as close to the process as we could get. We didn't just survey, observe and interview – we also moderated, listened and advised. Pursuing an [ethically committed approach to social science](#) requires researchers to persist with their work in the face of tensions and also to go along with the unexpected. Our research addresses both our disciplines and the various stakeholder groups in the field. If this work on the thinking and actions of others has left its mark, that's just what it was meant to do.



The intensive research experiences from and in Lusatia can be heard in our [podcast](#) and will [inform future projects](#). One of the questions that remains unanswered is how processes of regional change can be designed sustainably so that social, economic and ecological concerns are put on equal footing.