

RIFS-Blogpost

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Projekt:



Sustainable Regional Development: Success Factors for University–Practitioner Partnerships



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1.1 By David Löw-Beer (RIFS), Benjamin Nölting and Corinna Hartwig (both HNEE)

Sustainable regional development is a complex process aimed at securing long-term economic stability, social equity, and environmental sustainability. This requires the careful balancing of measures for environmental and climate protection, economic development, and social justice – issues that affect different stakeholders with often conflicting interests. Collaboration between science and practitioners can help to bridge gaps and create opportunities to trial solutions. Universities contribute scientific expertise, while practitioners – companies, municipalities or civil society organisations – possess first-hand knowledge of the relevant regional challenges and implementation options. While numerous studies have sought to identify the factors that make collaborations successful for universities, little research has been conducted on the perspectives of practitioners.

A team of scientists from the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) and Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development (HNEE), including David Löw-Beer and Benjamin Nölting, explored this topic in a recent study. Focussing on two transdisciplinary transfer projects – InNoWest and We 4.0 – the researchers analysed practitioners' expectations of cooperation with universities and examined how their ideas of sustainable regional development align with those of university researchers.

1.2 Sustainable regional development as a process of negotiation

One key finding of our study is that universities and practitioners have different understandings of sustainable regional development. Universities tend to take a more conceptual and long-term view of sustainability, while practitioners favour pragmatic solutions that can



be implemented in the near term. Nevertheless, our study shows that practitioners are open to negotiating the concept of regional sustainable development with university partners, provided the collaboration takes their interests and the regional context into account.

Clear communication, trust and tangible near-term successes are vital for successful collaboration. While the universities that we studied tend to focus on long-term sustainability goals, practitioners prioritise the direct benefits that collaboration can provide for their day-to-day operations or organisation. Striking a balance between these perspectives is crucial to the success of partnerships.

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1.3 Step-by-step cooperation: From small projects to long-term collaboration

Another important finding of the study is that trust does not develop overnight. In the early phases of collaboration, small projects with a pragmatic focus can serve as a basis for building trust and exploring common ground. Pilot projects of this kind offer scope for experimentation and allow both parties to achieve initial successes without entering into long-term commitments.

Interestingly, the study also reveals that universities adopt a flexible approach to conceptualizing sustainability in the early stages of collaboration. Their initial focus is on building trust, even making compromises to pave the way for more ambitious sustainability projects later on. This adaptability fosters collaboration and allows practitioner partners to align their own sustainability goals with those of the university in a gradual process.

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1.4 Success factors for collaboration

Our analysis of the two transfer projects identifies three key success factors for sustainable university-practitioner collaboration:

1. **Building trust through bottom-up interventions** that address local needs, even if this requires adapting sustainability goals.
2. **Creating an enabling environment** by establishing structures such as advisory boards to separate decision-making processes from substantive negotiations.
3. **Establishing long-term transfer structures** to ensure that collaboration continues beyond individual projects.

Our study shows that universities and practitioner partners shape sustainable regional development together by negotiating and aligning their different perspectives. Partnerships are successful when both sides are able to build trust, find pragmatic approaches and build long-term structures that persist beyond the scope of individual projects.

Link to the publication:

- Löw Beer, David; Graf, Verena; Kashlan, Benjamin, Nölting, Benjamin, Roose, Ilka (2025). How practitioners negotiate and balance their goals for regional sustainability transformation in collaborations with universities. *Review of Regional Research* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10037-025-00233-3>

The "Haus mit Zukunft" (House with a Future) in Angermünde, created through the WIR project, contributes to sustainable regional development. It serves as a hub for civic engagement and self-organization, hosting fellowship recipients, movement courses,



artistic activities, the MINT freiRAUM project, and AngerWERK, which offers advisory services on community-focused founding, transformation, and engagement. The city council, which owns the building, only charges a symbolic rent, enhancing Angermünde's cultural capital and positioning it as an innovative, open community. The project is supported by "Stadt mit Zukunft – Angermünde e.V." in collaboration with the city council, AngerWERK, and freiRAUM. There are also ongoing collaborations with the Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development.

