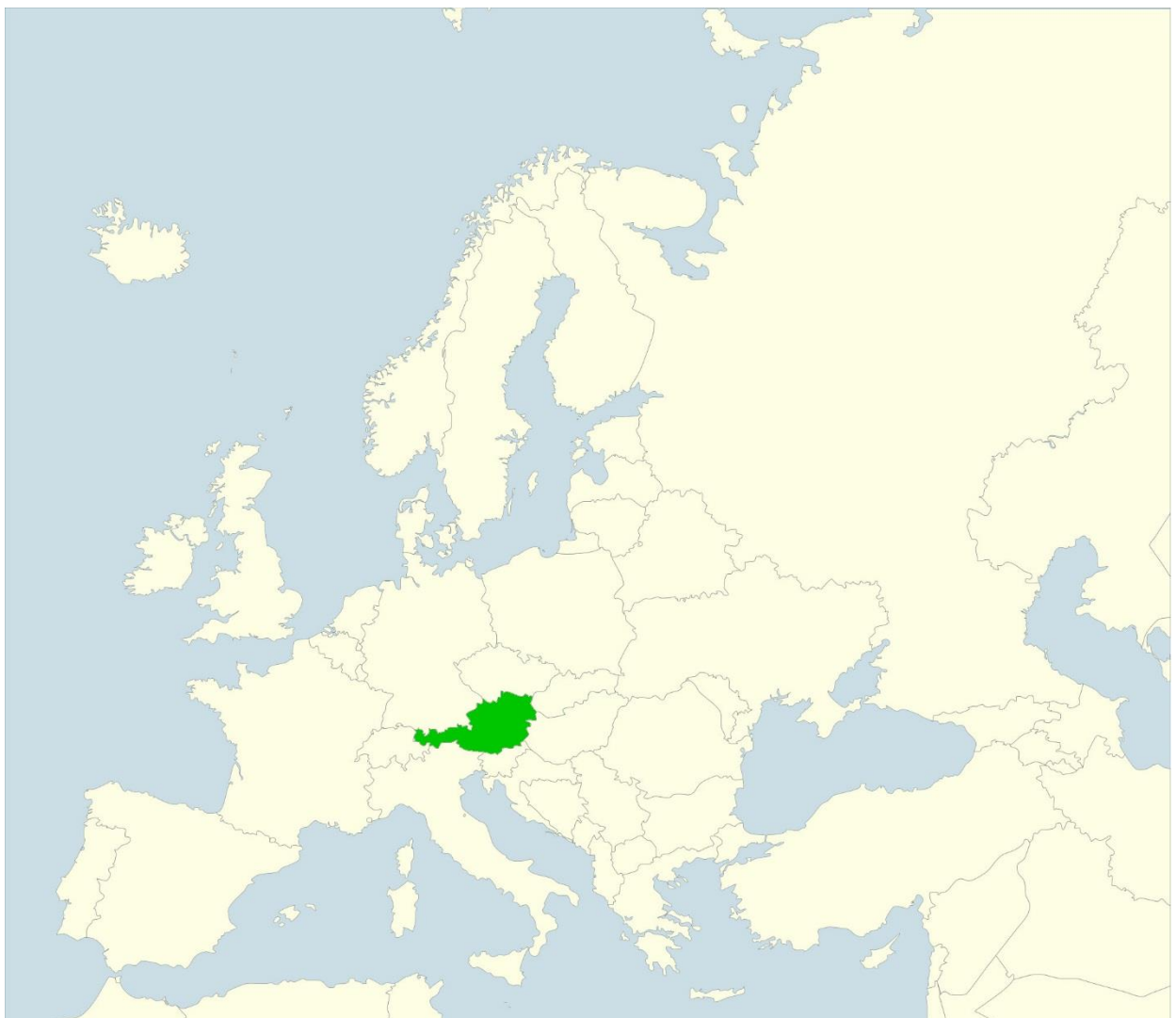


RURAL POVERTY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN STRUCTURALLY WEAK RURAL AREAS OF AUSTRIA FROM THE MAYORS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Poverty, material deprivation and marginalization are widespread phenomena in rural areas and since the 1980s, the subject of geographical research. In this paper, we combine the (spatial-related) aspects of rural poverty and quality of life when the perception and evaluation of poverty by local decision makers (mayors) is linked to their efforts to keep the municipality vital. The specific focus on the “inner view” on poverty illustrates the complexity of the issue: It is not only the well-known difficulty to identify the extent of rural poverty and deprivation in rural municipalities as statistical data and the “hiddenness” of poor people obstruct an objective view on it but also the individual perception of decision makers. The results from 40 mayors of structurally very weak (rural) municipalities in Austria reveals limitations of political dealings with poverty and marginalization and sets the context for a reinterpretation of public services on the background of the politically much favored civic engagement.

Keywords: rural poverty and deprivation, Austria, perception of local political decision-makers, quality of life, coping strategies, information sources

Kurzfassung: Armut und soziale Ausgrenzungsgefährdung sind sowohl im städtischen wie auch im ländlichen Kontext weitverbreitete Phänomene und seit den 1980er Jahren Gegenstand der geographischen Forschung. In diesem Beitrag verschneiden wir die (raumbezogenen) Aspekte von ländlicher Armut und Lebensqualität und den Bemühungen seitens der (ländlichen) Gemeinden, die gesellschaftliche Vitalität vor Ort aufrechtzuerhalten. Dazu bedienen wir uns der “Innensicht” der Bürgermeister. Die Komplexität des Themas und die damit verbundenen Herausforderungen wie etwa die Quantifizierung von Armut sind vor allem durch das Fehlen sekundärstatistischer Daten auf kleinräumiger Ebene, die eingeschränkte Sichtbarkeit des Phänomens und die Unterschiede in den subjektiven Wahrnehmungen schwierig zu fassen. Die Ergebnisse der Befragung von 40 Bürgermeistern – allesamt politische Repräsentanten sehr strukturschwacher (ländlicher) Gemeinden in Österreich – bringen die Einschränkungen des politischen Umgangs mit Armut und sozialer Ausgrenzungsgefährdung ans Licht und bilden den Rahmen für neue Deutungen öffentlicher Dienstleistungen vor dem Hintergrund, dass die Politik verstärkt auf das Ehrenamt setzt.

Schlagwörter: ländliche Armut, Österreich, Wahrnehmung durch die Lokalpolitik, Lebensqualität, Bewältigungsstrategien, Informationsquellen

1. Introduction

In Austria, recent statistics highlight the fact that not only urban areas but also rural areas are confronted with issues of poverty, material deprivation and marginalization (Wiesinger, 2002). Although one third of all people threatened by poverty and deprivation live in Vienna and one quarter in cities larger than 10,000 inhabitants, 42% live in smaller municipalities (BMASK, 2013). Quite typically, the danger of being or becoming poor – in terms of “relative poverty” as defined by the European Union (EUROSTAT, 2013) – is often related to a combination of socio-demographic characteristics and life situations: single mothers, single female elderlies and non-Austrian nationals are heavily affected (STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2015a). Similarly, households with more than three children, younger people and poorly educated people share a high risk of being or becoming poor. Demographic change, uneven provision of educational infrastructure and sparsely provided job opportunities can foster these processes (Weiss and Corthier, 2015) and this leads to increasing municipal social spending including Austria (KOMMUNALKREDIT AUSTRIA AG, ÖSTERREICHISCHER GEMEINDEBUND, ÖSTERREICHISCHER STÄDTEBUND, 2015: 59; BIFFL, 2007). In parallel, there is some case study-based international evidence that costs of living also rise in rural areas (Weiss and Corthier, 2015; Zimmermann, Ham and Frank, 2008) which explain the extended exposition to poverty and material deprivation and

its negative consequences for maintaining everyday organization and in the broadest sense, the quality of life of the people affected.

2. Poverty and deprivation as geographical research problems

Poverty and deprivation in rural areas have always been part of rural life but they became only relatively recent subjects of geographical interest. The provision of statistical data and the increasing role of planning brought these phenomena to the attention of geographers. Initially, there were three categories of deprivation which could be arranged in self-sustaining system of disadvantage: Household deprivation as problems related to income and housing, opportunity deprivation as limited access to jobs, services and infrastructure, and mobility deprivation as limited physical access to distant jobs, services and infrastructure (Shaw, 1979). Cloke and Park (1980: 57) state the perception of deprivation mostly as an urban phenomenon with little association to rural areas. It is quite striking that their description of many processes leading to deprivation is similar to those we observe today. Written from an applied rural geography's perspective, they identify the planning concept of centralizing vital infrastructure and services in key settlements as the first step of deprivation as poorer, and the least mobile sections of rural communities were effectively cut off from them. However, they also claim that social deprivation equally occurs either in areas with high or rather in those with almost no planning. To them, the process of deprivation resulted from a complex interaction of market forces and planning intervention.

McLaughlin (1986) draws the attention from planning and its effects to the uneven distribution of deprivation within rural societies. After pointing at the wrongly idyllic perception of rural areas and settlements, he adds an additional dimension to the rather spatially orientation of deprivation being related to service and infrastructure sites. Using survey data, he underlines that deprivation is equally distributed amongst all settlements regardless of their position in a hierarchical central place system but unequally distributed within rural societies. Thus, policy options focusing on the provision of services alone might not be helpful.

Poverty in rural areas is often perceived from a demographic perspective as rural areas suffer the most from an ageing population and in many cases from out-migration.

In a study focusing on the U.S., McLaughlin and Jensen (1995) used panel data to identify the extent and the process of poverty. The data indicate a significantly higher likelihood of elderly people slipping into poverty in rural compared to urban areas, although astonishingly, basic demographic differentiations such as race, marital status, age and education do not explain this higher likelihood. Thus, they conclude that the greater vulnerability of rural elderly is rooted in lifelong employment disadvantages associated with rural economies. This is an important finding, because it is a relatively early argument for structural changes in rural economies as related to the post-employment life phase.

From another, qualitative research perspective, Milbourne and Doheny (2012) looked at the relations between older people, poverty and place. Drawn from interviews, they identify a hiddenness of poverty in old age within the social, cultural and political landscape in rural Britain, which might be related to the mass of research and surveys based on the spatial analysis of statistical data and not so much on first hand empirical information. Paradoxically, they found a connection of poverty to both social exclusion (e.g., to the labour market and income opportunities) and to social inclusion (e.g., into peer-groups and welfare-orientated organisations). From their data, the highest level of poverty is to be found in towns and the lowest in small rural settlements, which might be an effect of migration flows as welfare organisations and institutions are more likely to be located in towns. They stress the importance of individual biographies and backgrounds like culture, attitudes toward self-reliance, sources of pensions and income etc.), but in parallel, highlight equally the dynamics of poverty as single events (e.g., housing repairs and maintenance of car, fuel prices in cold winters etc.) might let elderly people slip into poverty or increase their poverty. This notion of a multiple exposition to poverty risks is also raised by Petrova (2018) when she analyses the situation of young adults: Living predominantly in unsafe social and housing arrangements they suffer from an unjust access to energy and are vulnerable to energy precarity, i.e., fuel and energy poverty.

Any study related to poverty in rural contexts focuses on women. Wells (2002) concludes her empirical work on white women in the U.S. in pointing out the fact that poverty is merely not associated with insufficient labor force attachment but with low wages. Thus, the widespread ideal of self-sufficiency in rural areas does not fit women, especially those who have children. These findings are supported by the results from Snyder and McLaughlin (2004) who identified for the rural U.S. significantly higher poverty risks for single-mother households compared to other family forms in general and to single-mother households in urban areas in particular. To them, important factors for any exposure to poverty are the relatively high living costs and other expenditures, which contradict the often mentioned lower housing costs in rural areas. They also highlight subfamilies with single-mothers as a group that is highly affected by poverty but misrepresented in research.

Despite the availability of substantial information about the behavioral, cultural, economic, and political characteristics of high-poverty areas, spatial mobility of the poor has been a rather neglected topic until the mid-1990s. Nord, Luloff and Jensen (1995) state that there was little information about migration patterns of poor and non-poor and especially about in-migration and out-migration of the poor in and between poverty-ridden areas. In their analysis of the census data from 1982 and 1984, they found that the spatial concentration of poverty was not directly linked to the unwillingness or lack of resources of poor people to move out; quite astonishingly, there was a high out-migration rate of the poor but an even higher in-migration rate as well leading to a high turnover within the poor population. These findings confirmed their hypothesis about the relative importance of opportunities to move in related to opportunities to move out. Furthermore, they identified the lack of economic opportunities for low-skilled workers and the lack of affordable housing as the main explanatory factors of these migration patterns.

Fitchen (1994) focused on short-distance residential moves made by low-income families in communities of upstate New York. She found high frequencies with relatively short periods of stay as observed by Nord, Luloff and Jensen (1995) but emphasized the factors leading to these migration patterns. Public support, financial assistance and housing schemes have an equally high effect as housing costs whereas employment (or at least the change of employment) plays only a minor role. The observed high frequency of moves has significant effects on schools, education, vocational training, communities, and individual support networks which affect single-parent families the most. According to her findings, the higher the level of integration into networks, the lower is the mobility.

On the background of the so-called “brain drain” and the observed intra-regional mobility of the poor, Foulkes and Newbold (2008) focused on highly mobile communities and the creation of certain places as “catchment areas” for these migrants. Using quantitative and qualitative data, they were able to identify factors that stress this specific demographic function: the abundance of affordable rental housing tends to attract low-income families, and informal, family-based information networks about affordable housing encourage people to move their kin. Based on the assumption that moving might be an opportunity for a new start, or an integration into the group of other poor, or an approximation to a support (family) node, they developed a differentiation and sequence of “emerging poverty migration catchments” becoming “continuous poverty migration catchments”. These two areas share inexpensive rent patterns, the concentration of mobility in a few rental units, and the interpretation of the community as an opportunity for migrants, but differ in the structure and control of rental stocks as well as the perception of the area as home.

Any attempt to use statistical data to identify the role of micro and macro factors in the creation of poverty and deprivation, is not only hampered by limited access to data and different scales of date but also by existing national differentiations. Whelan and Maitre (2012: 501) recently analysed statistical data from all 28 European countries by using multilevel analysis. Although they could identify various factors leading to and defining deprivation, they stressed the need to focus on small entities, their composition of factors and perceptions. Moreover, they support the notion that national poverty-tackling policies are relevant for cross-national studies but vary in their effects on a national level.

A recent paper (Warburton, Scharf and Walsh 2017) focusses on three dimensions of ageing in rural communities when it addresses the individual community context as one background of deprivation, the relevant socio-legal system and jurisdiction, and finally the role of health and community stakeholders in the communities. Using a risk-related approach, they compare the perception of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion in Australia, Ireland and Northern Ireland. Important factors putting people at risk to deprivation and poverty were distance-related social exclusion, economic circumstances, the pace of transformation overtaking the adapting capabilities, and changes in both formal and informal social services. Looking at the individual people, mobility, financial resources and health conditions were mentioned. From their surveys, it becomes obvious that poverty and deprivation must be interpreted and acknowledged within an interrelated system of community and individual expositions, challenges and possibilities.

It is their finding “that, in the view of stakeholders, communities offer critical pathways to social inclusion, with the potential for inclusion far out-weighing the potential for exclusion” (Warburton, Scharf and Walsh 2017: 474) which raises the question about the perception of poverty and deprivation by decision takers in rural communities.

Research Gap

Although a range of studies dealt so far with poverty and deprivation in rural areas, there is little comprehension of the much-needed perspective of spatial differentiation of this phenomenon. While focusing on an urban-rural divide, rural areas themselves are marginally perceived in their spatial variety taking into account location parameters (suburban, peripheral), settlement types and degrees of infrastructure provision on the one hand and the perception of poverty and poverty risks from a policymaker’s point of view on the other hand.

Poverty in rural areas is not only a socio-statistical or econometric phenomenon but deserves equal attention from a government and governance orientated perspective. Local administrations and institutions of the civil society perceive and interpret poverty differently; these varieties in perception and interpretation lead to different policies in tackling poverty and deprivation. Secondly, local and regional planning are traditionally not very intensively entangled in discourses on poverty and deprivations. Their focus on regional development, infrastructure and generally the open and built environment neglects tends to neglect social issues.

Aim of the paper and research questions

Against the backdrop of increasing social spending in municipalities in Austria and location-based challenges of everyday life organization, this paper aims to explain the relevance of poverty and deprivation for structurally weak rural municipalities in Austria, a high income country in Central European country from the mayors’ perspective. The focus of this empirical research based paper is set on the “inner” perception, evaluation and interpretation of rural poverty, and approaches of structural weak rural municipalities to counteract poverty and deprivation and sets the frame for an evaluation of contemporary and future challenges. As the perspective is derived both from social and applied geography, an analysis of empirical data leads to a discussion about local perception, interpretation and tackling of poverty and deprivation on a local level. Regarding the widespread trust of local politics on civic engagement, it is argued that public engagement can only attribute to planning but not replace it.

For this reason, the following two research questions are posed:

1. How do mayors perceive and deal with poverty and material deprivation in their municipalities?
2. What are the interlinkages between poverty and development of structurally weak rural municipalities?

3. Methods

Defining and identification of structurally weak rural areas

This paper focuses on very structurally weak rural areas based on the fact that the organisation of everyday life – especially for those who have limited mobility and lack stable support from family, neighbours or friends – is increasingly challenging there. In particular, sparsely populated and mono-structured rural areas are characterised by high proportions of (daily) commuters and (selective) out-migration, and thus cope with population decline, ageing and losses of societal vitality, infrastructural decline and limited access or rather freedom of choice of goods and services (Cloke, Milbourne and Thomas, 1997; Schmitz-Veltin, 2006; Hooks, Lobao and Tickamyer, 2016).

Basing on the map of ‘structurally weak and strong municipalities’ created by Höferl and Jelinek (2007: 785), all municipalities that meet the criteria ‘structurally very weak’ and situated at Austrian federal state or national borders (N = 189) have been identified and selected. The latter selection criterion is based on confirmed knowledge about the challenging relevance of geographical location factors against the backdrop of periphery (Henninger, 1998: 18 ff.) and geopolitical history for successful municipality development and cross-border cooperation in the national as well as in international context (Marot, 2013).

Information retrieval process

In August 2017, a questionnaire including a cover letter was sent by mail to the mayors of all 189 identified “structurally very weak” municipalities. They were kindly asked to support this pilot study that neither received funding nor built upon a previous project. The data collection process coincided with an (from the point of view of the mayors) unfavourable time: the first wave of refugees.

Nevertheless, 40 out of 189 mayors participated in the survey. Figure 1 provides a short portrait of the participating municipalities as well as of the political affiliation of the mayors.

The questionnaire was inspired by the findings of a report of the Hans Seidel-Stiftung on rural poverty in Germany (Franke, 2015). Franke et al. (2015) detected: 1. Inter-relations between poverty and vulnerability on the one hand; and 2. between old-age poverty and regional development on the other hand, as well as 3. the importance of volunteering as a scoping strategy to mitigate the poor position of people affected by poverty.

Thus, the questionnaire covered five thematic sections, described as follows:

The first section served as an introduction and focused on the state of play of the mayors’ personal and political reflection of poverty and material deprivation in their municipalities.

In the second section, the degree of the inhabitants’ affectedness of poverty and being at risk of poverty was worked out. The mayors were asked to describe the exposition of the various population groups, to evaluate the development and the drivers of poverty in their municipalities in retrospect and to preview related further development.

The third section dealt with the visibility of poverty and poverty risks and focused on information sources, hidden poverty as well as on the role of the mayor and volunteers in order to mitigate the negative consequences of material deprivation.

Section 4 concentrated on the consequences of poverty and poverty risks for everyday life, quality of life, municipal spending and development.

Political measures of the municipalities in order to mitigate the negative consequences of material deprivation were illustrated in section 5.

The questionnaire comprised of 30 open questions.

Characteristics of mayors		Characteristics of municipalities	
Gender	Male: 39 Female: 1	Federal State	Burgenland: 6 Carinthia: 7 Lower Austria: 10 Upper Austria: 8 Salzburg: 2 Styria: 5 Tyrol: 2 Vorarlberg: 0
Political adscription	Conservative Austria People's Party: 26 Social Democratic: 9 Others: 5	Population	less than 1,000 persons: 11 1,000 to 1,999 persons: 21 2,000 to 2,900 persons: 6 3,000 to 3,900 persons: 1 more than 4,000 persons: 1
		Type of rural area	small town/district's capital: 1 rural areas intermediate or next to regional centres (up to 5 km): 24 remote rural areas (up to 61 km): 15
		Degree of urbanisation	intermediate (towns/suburbs): 1 thinly-populated: 39

Fig 1. The participating "structurally very weak" municipalities at a glance. Data sources: STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2014a-c; STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2015b-e; STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2016; STATISTIK AUSTRIA 2017; GOOGLE MAPS; own calculations. Own illustration.

Analysis and handling of data

Firstly, an EXCEL table was generated: Each mayor/municipality got an ID. The IDs of the mayors were listed in lines, the verbal information – taken from the questionnaires – in columns. Each attribute related to a separate column of the EXCEL table. All verbal information was entered as "strings" in the data base.

In a second step, the verbal information was coded using the method of Glaser and Strauss (1998) and taking into account the challenges of transcripts (CAMPELL et al., 2013). In order to simplify the calculations, the "numeric database" was converted into a SPSS file and analysed descriptively.

The response rate (40 out of 189 mayors), the amount of missing information (see fig. 2) and the different quality of the information provided related to comprehensiveness (keywords, half sentences, full sentences) do not claim the representativeness of the primary data. Thus, the available results require a cautious data interpretation. Obviously, the real quantitative dimension of poverty in the municipalities as well as the actual individual and political affectedness by poverty and poverty risks could not solely be derived from the information provided by the mayors.

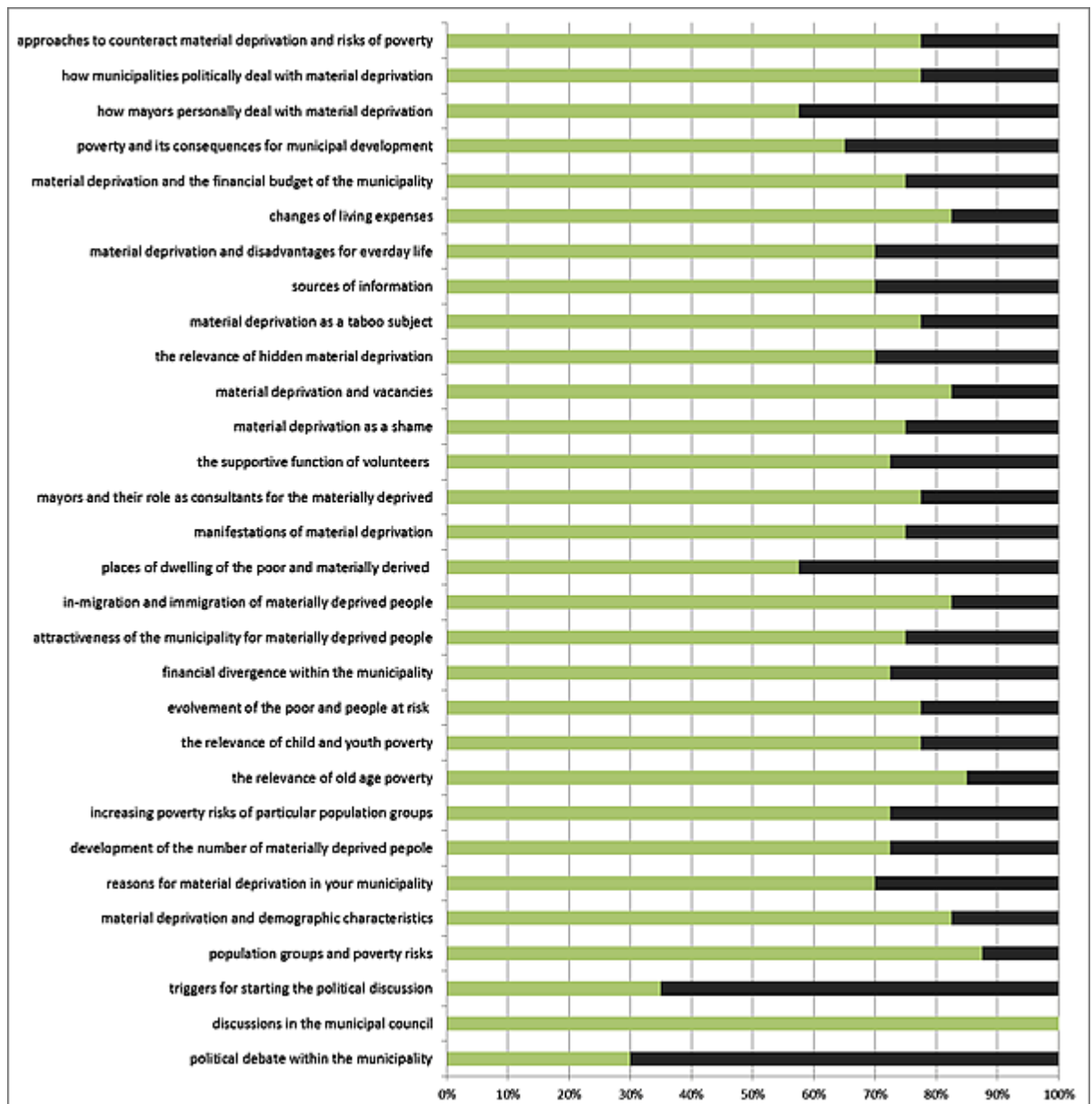


Fig 2. Breakdown of available information. Green bars: information is provided; grey bars: information is missing. Own illustration.

4. Results

In the following, the results are presented anonymously in order to avoid drawing conclusions for certain municipalities. Direct quotations that show original verbal information from the mayors illustrate particular situations and for this purpose are put in quotes.

Poverty and material deprivation – a touching topic?

18 out of 23 mayors stated that the issue of poverty is of personal concern to them and they deal and help individually in various ways. Altruistic attitudes towards the poor do neither depend on the degree of rurality of the municipality nor on the political adscription of the mayor. The mayors help within their political functions, but also as private individuals, whereby two mayors clearly pointed out that they personally help people that they “have known for a long time”.

There is hardly any information available on issues that concern the mayors regarding poverty: three mayors stated that the support of children affected by poverty is an issue especially close to their hearts.

25 out of 31 mayors take over an advisory function for people affected by poverty providing information on offers of support, one mayor does that occasionally and five mayors do not. The remoter the rural municipality was, the higher the relevance of the advisory function of the mayor. The consultancy work includes helping with the application for funding and remission or rather guaranteed minimum income as well as the procurement of assistance services or the forwarding to a competent body, the establishment of a social coordinator in the community and to put up information in the local newspaper. Usually, consultations take place at the community office. This makes the community office an information hub and the first point of contact.

How mayors learn about poverty and material deprivation at the local level: breakdown of information sources

Besides their personal engagement, their experience or rather observation and their personal contacts, the mayors gain their knowledge from different sources of information. They receive the most important hints from the citizens themselves, followed by information from social organizations, social workers and representatives of associations (exchange with superior authorities), nursing staff, the church and from school or rather teachers (see Fig. 3)

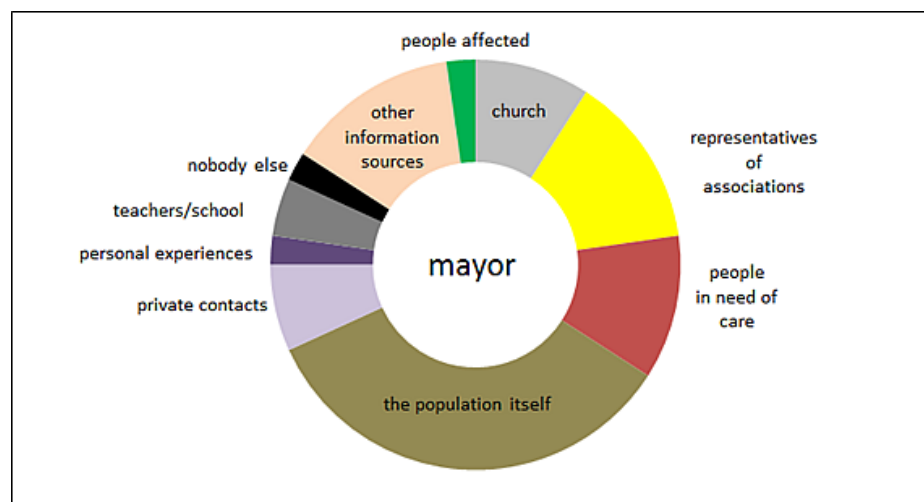


Fig 3. Sources of information. "Other information sources" comprise citizen information, social counselling, district administration, aid organizations, municipal newspapers, social workers. Own illustration.

One mayor in two gains knowledge on poverty and material deprivation from more than one source of information. Mayors of remote rural municipalities tend to be informed more often by the church, representatives of associations and nursing staff than mayors of rural municipalities located next to regional centres. The latter receive their information from more sources.

Socio-demographic contexts of poverty and the risk of poverty

The (risk of) poverty of certain groups of people and the correlation with selected demographic features are being assessed by the mayors very differently. At least eight mayors recognise interdependencies between poverty and gender, low income, care responsibilities for children, and migration backgrounds.

Apart from one mayor, who identifies no particularly vulnerable group of people, the mayors name four groups of people especially at risk of poverty: unemployed people, single parents, older people as well as extended families (see Fig. 4).

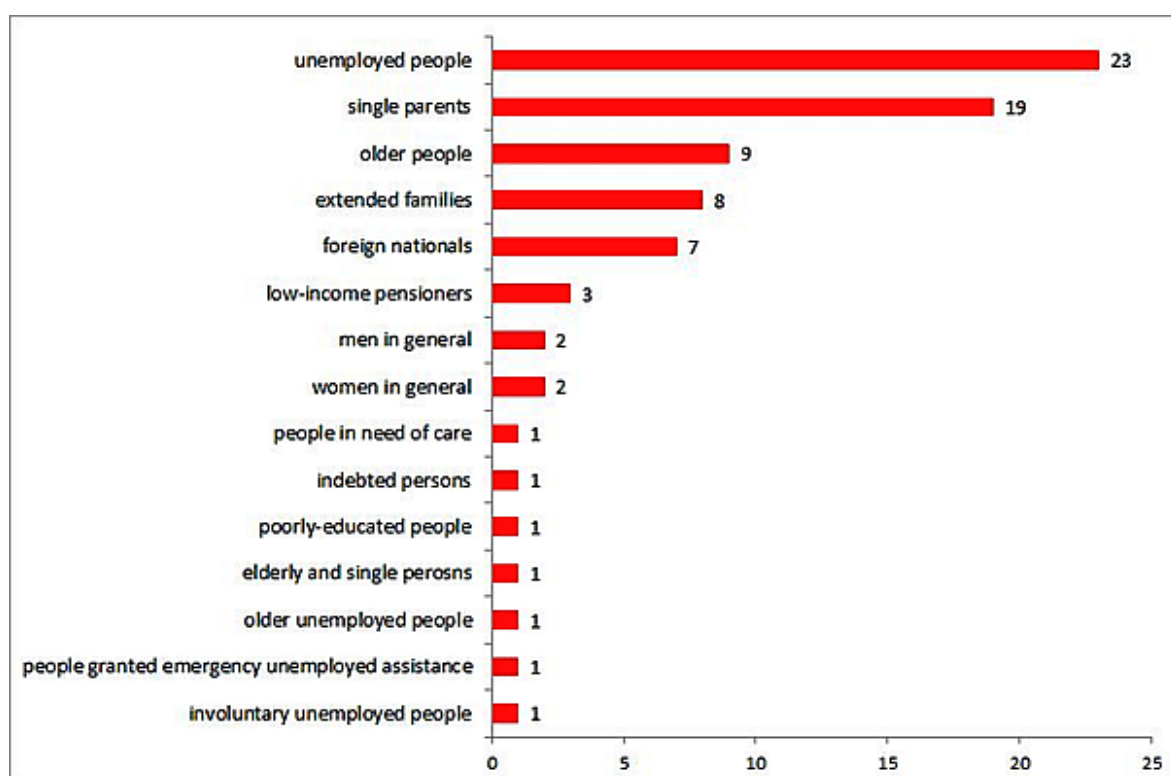


Fig 4. Groups of persons affected by poverty or at risk of poverty. Own illustration.

The mayors' assessments of the especially affected groups of people (as described above) go with their partly controversial statements concerning the importance of child, youth and old-age poverty in the municipalities.

According to 22 mayors, child and youth poverty are not an issue in their municipality. They justify their assessments with different arguments: 1. still functioning family units, 2. simply a lack of child or youth poverty in their municipality, 3. the engagement of the municipality in assistance in job search or rather in offering training opportunities, and 4. "grandparents have money". However, nine mayors representing remote and intermediate rural municipalities acknowledge that child and youth poverty are, to varying degrees, an issue in their municipality, whereas two mayors state that they are solely marginal issues.

With regard to old-age poverty, twice as many mayors – amongst them the mayor representing the district's capital – consider, that old-age poverty is not an issue in their municipality (yet). Those, who stated that old-age poverty is definitely an issue in their municipality, evaluated the manifestation of the phenomenon very differently (see Fig. 5).

Old-age poverty is an issue.	Old-age poverty is not an issue.
"The costs for nursing are increasing."	"Nursing of elderly people is still done by the family unit."
"Elderly widows are particularly at risk of poverty."	"Elderly people are modest and frugal"
"The pensions are low." "The job situation in the municipality is insufficient."	"The national pension is sufficiently high enough."
"The living expenses are increasing."	"Local communities and existing social networks mitigate the negative consequences of poverty."
"The costs for housing are high."	"The municipality provides support in the form of social benefits and heating cost subsidy."

Fig 5. Justification of old-age poverty in (remote) rural municipalities. Excerpts from the questionnaires.

Five mayors attribute old-age poverty, as well as child and youth poverty to their municipality. Based on the empirical findings, possible interrelations between this problem-centred congruence and the kind of sources of information used by the mayors, cannot be revealed.

29 out of 40 mayors allow insights to their attitudes on the development of poverty and the risk of poverty in their municipality. They described the development very differently, whereas not a single mayor identifies any reduction of poverty in his municipality over time. In contrast, 13 mayors observed an increase of people affected by poverty and the risk of poverty (“the costs of living are increasing”), whereas 16 mayors say that the number of people affected by poverty has remained on a stable level in their municipality over time (“the municipality has always been poor”).

Two out of three mayors do not think that there are any specific groups of people, particularly at risk of poverty in their municipalities.

Nevertheless, amongst others, there are three groups of people who particularly seem to be increasingly endangered by poverty: single mothers, persons receiving minimum pensions, unemployed persons, and young people.

Focussing on remote, rural municipalities with population less than 1,000 inhabitants, older people, persons receiving minimum pensions, as well as young families are alleged to be increasingly at risk of material deprivation. The answer of one mayor expresses his lack of understanding on the inability of certain people to master their lives (e.g., alcoholics).

Causes of material deprivation

The mayors trace back poverty and the risk of poverty in their municipalities to four different causes, whereby location-related structural causes are identified as main triggers:

- labour market related conditions and deficiencies: in this matter they summarise unemployment and difficult employment relationships, as well as insufficient qualified job opportunities
- changing living conditions or rather private reasons: divorce/separation, death of spouse/partner, being single/being a single parent, being ill
- personal “inabilities”: financially overstretching/ indebtedness/poor money management, low income, lack of education, alcohol problems, cell phone/gambling addiction of young people
- general inflation: expenses for pensioners are too high/low national pensions

Whilst the mayor representing a small town only identifies two causes of material deprivation (lack of adequate jobs, bad state of health), mayors of rural municipalities mention much more (overlapping) reasons for poverty, above all unemployment and divorce/separation.

An in-depth analysis of the mayors’ assessments regarding the reasons for child and youth poverty reveals a wealth of aspects and the relevance of “private influence factors”: the (financial) carelessness of parents and the increasing monetary claims, real rather than self-inflicted financial hardships or rather existential worries of (single) parents, structural problems of the municipality itself, e.g., unemployment or shortage of jobs and lack of education, as well as the lack of sensitivity regarding this issue.

Poverty and the risk of poverty and the management of everyday life

With one exception, all mayors who answered this question (n = 28) named specific consequences for the people affected by poverty related to their everyday life organization and addressed challenges to meet basic functions of existence, above all mobility, education, living, providing, nutrition and recreation (see Fig. 6). Three out of 27 mayors even think that all areas of life are affected.

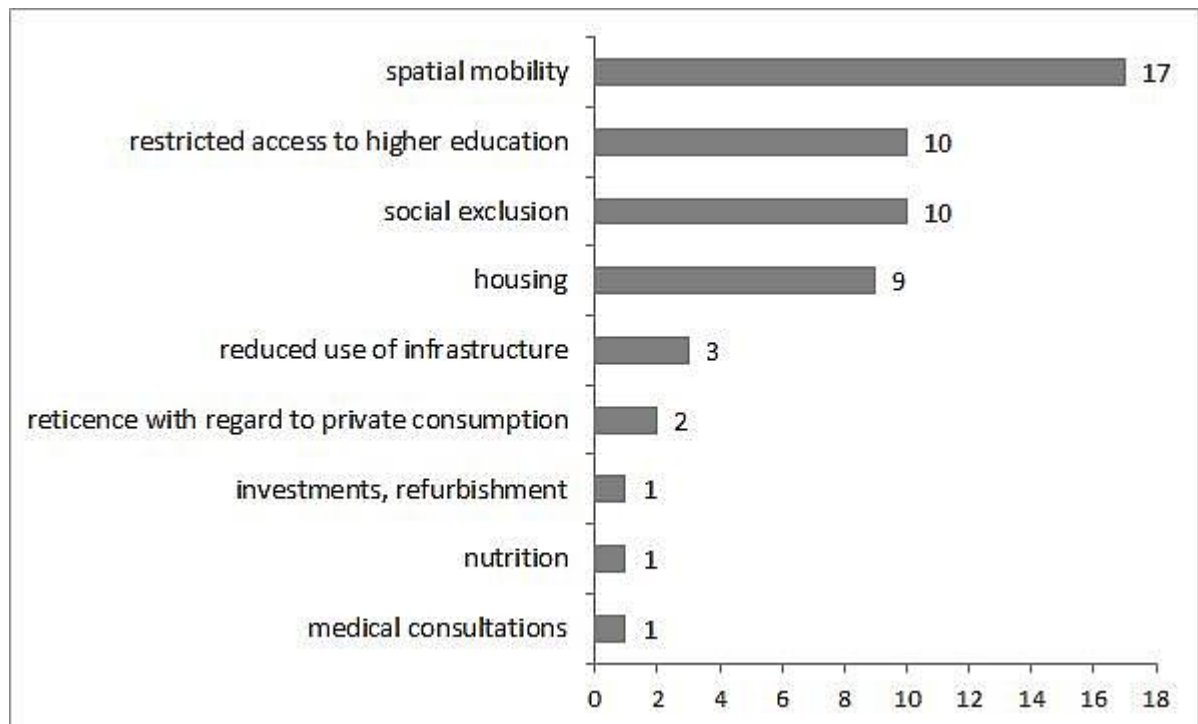


Fig 6. Basic functions of existence endangered by material deprivation. Own illustration.

In case of multiple responses, the most frequent combinations of basic functions of existence are:

- spatial mobility & social exclusion,
- housing & spatial mobility,
- spatial mobility & social exclusion & limited access to higher education.

Spatial mobility is the most challenging and affects not only (peripheral) rural municipalities at a distance to the next regional center (up to 63 km) and difficult to access by public transportation (1 to 2 busses a day) or rather small municipalities with a population less than 1,000 persons, but also municipalities close to regional centers (5 km) with good access to public transport (related to the number of connections and time requirement), as well as for the district's capital.

Those mayors who consider interlinkages between poverty and reduced access to higher education cannot be attributed to the availability of public transport or rather long distances to the next regional education sites.

The mayors tend to identify the (at least partially) increasing costs of living in their municipality as a crucial challenge for people affected by poverty and material deprivation. In their opinion, this is due to consumer price inflation and rising food prices, increasing rental rates, changes in consumer behaviour overshadowed by rising costs for spatial mobility.

This raises the question of whether structurally weak rural municipalities are or rather will remain preferred or temporary living places of people affected by poverty.

Only one quarter of the mayors gave their opinions to this issue by saying that their municipality in general is attractive – among them also the district's capital – as a temporary place of residence, whereas half of the respondents beg to differ. The pros and cons are summed up in Figure 7.

Furthermore, there is no consensus on the issue of reduction building vacancy by people affected by poverty (related to in-migrants). Two mayors explicitly regret, that “nomadic renting” leads to back rents and resignation of the lease contracts.

Reasons for being attractive	Compelling reasons for not being attractive
affordable housing (“nomadic renting”)	peripheral position of the municipality
sound infrastructure	
efficient public transport	poor quality of the public transport
“living in rural areas is cheap” (“in-migrants from urban areas as well as people from immediate neighbourhood”)	“All people who live here, have jobs.” “The number of persons who in-migrate or rather move is very small.”
existence of social projects	
“existence of a refugee centre”	

Fig 7. Arguments for and against the attractiveness of the (rural) municipalities as temporary places of residence for material deprived people or rather persons at risk of poverty.

“Anyone should not be ashamed of being materially deprived”: on the visibility of poverty

The empirical findings related to the visibility of material deprivation are extremely heterogeneous: three mayors indicated that poverty does not show in their municipality, whereas 24 mayors – representing remote, intermediate and rural municipalities next to regional centres, as well as the district’s capital –, described the visibility of poverty as follows: the affected people apply for financial assistance or support (especially for their children) at the municipality, they ask the municipality or the mayor for job search assistance and withdrawal from public life (see Fig. 8)

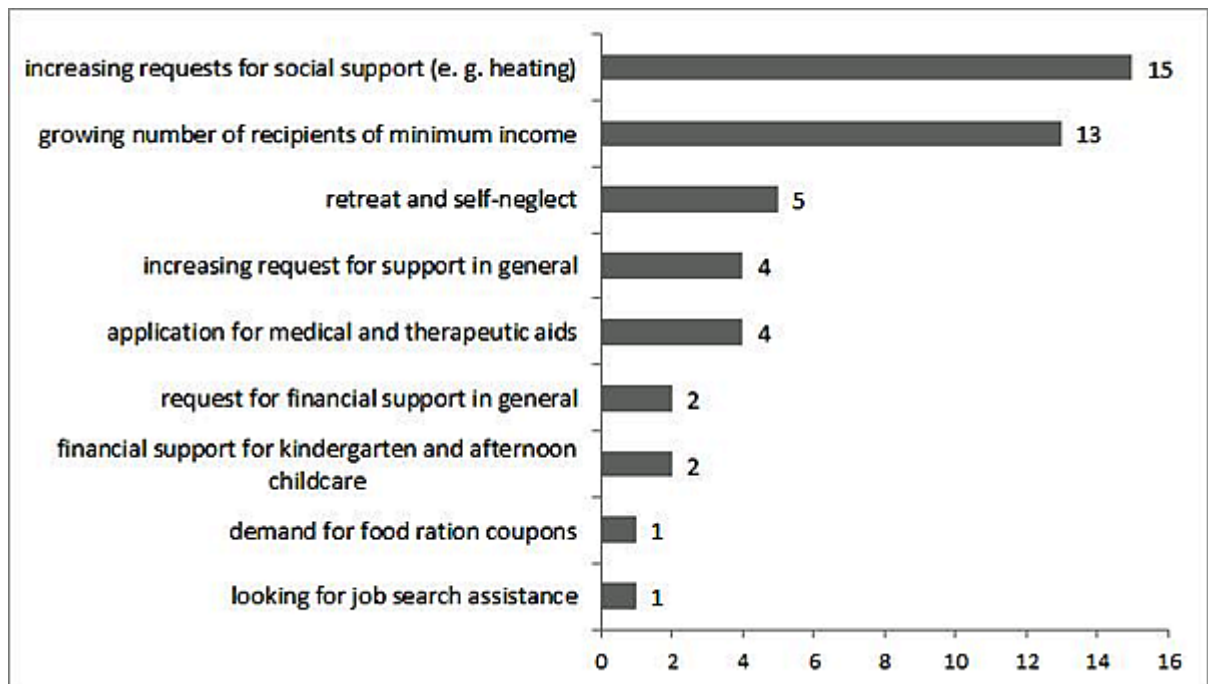


Fig 8. Indications of material deprivation. Source: own illustration

In order to extrapolate to the quantity of those, who deliberately are not willing to ask for help or support, the majority of the mayors confirmed an important limitation: in their opinion, people affected by poverty and material deprivation feel too embarrassed to ask for help. This particularly includes elderly people, furthermore unemployed persons, foreign nationals, women and single parents.

The empirical findings show that poverty and the risk of poverty are real, but partially hidden issues. However, there is dissent within the mayors on putting “poverty and material deprivation” on the municipalities’ political agenda. This fact supports the assumption, that material deprivation

is obviously still a taboo subject within the municipalities. This is confirmed by the assessments of 16 mayors. Reasons for that are as follows:

“In small municipalities, people know each other and are embarrassed of their life situations.”

“There is a lack of anonymity.”

“People affected are in fear of gloating of others.”

“Nobody wants to deal with it.”

15 other mayors stated that poverty definitely is not a taboo subject in their municipalities. One of the mayors admitted that he could not imagine the reasons why poverty and the risk of poverty should be taboos.

These findings explain why poverty and the risk of poverty are only being politically discussed in every fifth rural municipality.

How material deprivation and municipal development are interlinked

According to the mayors, poverty and risks of poverty become a challenge in those municipalities, where rising costs of living affects far larger segments of the population. Based on the empirical findings due to the mayors' statements on the interlinkages of material deprivation and municipal development this probably or rather apparently applies to one in four municipalities.

Poverty and material deprivation hinder flourishing municipal development due to:

- an ongoing financial polarization of groups of people within the municipality,
- challenges in financial management and maintenance of infrastructure,
- the fact that material deprivation has negative effects on the social cohesion in the municipality.

The mayors disagree on whether certain groups of people drift apart regarding their financial development: whereas 13 out of 29 mayors say that there is no drifting apart, 15 mayors consider that this is the case.

Those mayors who fear or perceive financial polarization within their municipalities, give attention to the following groups of people:

- single parents and divorced parents,
- people without education,
- families with children,
- older people with low income or rather national pension, retired farmers,
- people who cannot manage their money.

Moreover, potential conflicts between

- private sector employees and civil servants (district's capital),
- the working population and the unemployed (peripheral rural municipalities) and
- young families and older people

are being addressed.

In addition, 16 mayors – representing both, (remote) rural areas and the district's capital – expect an increase of people affected by poverty in their municipalities (“overall negative economic development”/“job cuts”/“lack of adequate and qualified jobs”/“rural exodus of young adults”), whereas 9 mayors think, that the numbers will be stable. One mayor states: “Things are unlikely to change”. Another one hopes that the number of people affected by poverty or at risk of poverty will not increase. Four mayors would not like to make a forecast, “because the future development is not foreseeable yet”.

If financial effects of poverty for the (rural) municipalities are being addressed by the mayors, they relate to:

- arrears in taxes, deferred payments of taxes,
- increasing social expenditures for the municipalities,
- decline of infrastructure (restaurants, companies) in remote rural municipalities and
- the raise in fixed costs and adjustment of fees by the municipality in order to maintain basic (technical) infrastructures (e.g., sewers).

This leads to the question about the consequences of material deprivation and the “widespread” risk of poverty on the further infrastructural and social development of the rural municipalities. 26 out of 40 mayors adopt a position on this issue: The thematic references are manifold and describe a negative spiral of development: Poverty leads to increasing social spending and (if possible) to investments of the municipality in housing and in the maintenance of daily supply of goods and services (both possible triggers for municipal indebtedness), as well as to the promotion of neighbourhood assistance. In addition, the different perceptions of the mayors of the mitigation capacity of family cohesion and the growing gap between materially deprived at old age and those who are not being affected, as well as intergenerational financial transactions, help to “prevent worse”.

Only one mayor sees material deprivation as an opportunity: In his opinion, it could be a trigger for strengthening solidarity among people concerned.

The mayors’ opinions on the potential of volunteering to mitigate the negative consequences of poverty differ: 11 out of 29 mayors stated that voluntary workers do not support people affected by poverty, whereas 16 mayors said that this is the case. Relating to the organization of voluntary work, the mayors distinguish between informal and formal civic engagement. Informal volunteering comprises informal neighbourhood assistance for friends and acquaintances and relates to visiting services and social integration of marginalised people – the latter is very important in rural municipalities with population less than 1,000 persons –, as well as to in kind donations.

Formal volunteering comprises, for instance social information centres, the Red Cross, the parish, and organized neighbourhood.

One mayor stated that volunteering does not play an important role in the mitigation of the negative consequences of material deprivation due to the lack of visibility of this issue.

Poverty and risks of poverty – yet put on the political agenda?

In 32 out of 40 municipalities, the issues of poverty and the risk of poverty are not being discussed in the municipal councils yet. The mayors provide three diverse justifications:

- “having no reason for doing that” due to a “lack of trigger causes”
- “no urgent need for discussion”, because “neighbourhood assistance is still working”
- “This might be going too far, because politics should not get involved into individual circumstances of life.” This argument indicates a “denial of the issue”

However, poverty and risk of poverty are explicitly on the political agenda of four (remote) rural municipalities. Above all, this is related to the heightened awareness of the mayors due to the manifestation of material deprivation in their municipalities: increasing number of people applying for heating cost subsidy, “children who cannot participate in social life”, people unable to cover their running costs, “increasing demand for affordable housing”. That is why (peripheral) structurally-weak rural municipalities face three key challenges: (selective) out-migration, job shortages and an increasing number of persons not being able to pay the local taxes.

Political measures at the local level

Once, poverty and the risk of poverty have been identified as relevant issues, the municipalities in their function as local authorities react due to certain events as well as in various ways: whereas some municipalities have already established a social committee, others allow payment by instalments or rather deferments of payments, others in turn provide advisory functions or rather set up social funding for “social hardship”. Social democratic mayors tend to put the focus of the local measures on affordable housing, job creation and the establishment of a social market, whereas those who are members of the Conservative Austria People’s Party as well as mayors of (peripheral) rural municipalities with few inhabitants tend to strengthen volunteering and job creation in general.

Figure 9 shows the municipalities’ current measures in order to deal with material deprivation.

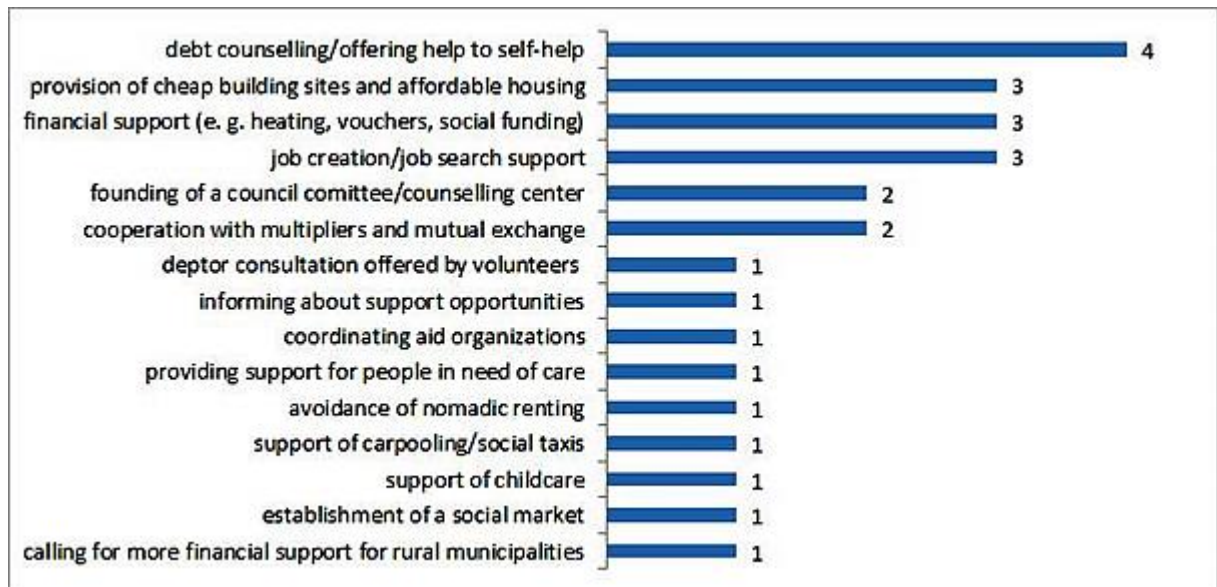


Fig 9. Measures to counteract material deprivation. Source: own illustration

One mayor admitted that he did not know how to cope with poverty (“It is like finding the philosopher’s stone.”), whereas three other mayors said that this issue should be “negotiated at the national level” in order to “strengthen rural areas in general”. One mayor stated that social networks and the “willingness to be helped” are key factors for successful dealing with material deprivation.

It can be noted, that comprehensive strategies for dealing with poverty and the risk of poverty are still missing.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our research is focused on a perspective which has previously been neglected by social scientists and geographers: Any discussion of poverty and deprivation must take the specific position of the local mayor into consideration as mayors represent and govern the local community. Thus, it is inevitable to analyze their perception of poverty and deprivation.

However, it must be mentioned, that the scale of the survey and some lack of information given by the interviewed does not allow for any generalization of the results; it is not possible to link the data to aspects of gender or political affiliation.

It can be assumed that the perception and evaluation of poverty by the mayors heavily depend on their information sources and their individual contacts with people affected. Given the setting and size of rural communities, most mayors are in two ways personally touched by poverty and material deprivation: Firstly, they usually know a couple of people affected personally, and secondly, the tackling of poverty is seen as one important task of a mayor. Poverty and deprivation

can be perceived as a professional failure. In this context, it is necessary to think about the reliability of the verbal information provided, even if “data” show that the mayors do not contradict themselves and their evaluations related to the affectedness of certain population groups are in line with national statistics on personal experiences of poverty and poverty risks (STATISTIK AUSTRIA, 2009). However, the perception of poverty and deprivations differs individually and is subject to experiences. Even if these differences are taken into account the disagreement among the mayors on the further development of rural poverty is striking and makes it difficult to find material deprivation as an “emerging problem” for structurally weak rural municipalities. Taking these differences into account, it might be considered that all stakeholders responsible for welfare in the broadest sense may have different opinions and perceptions as well as which would add an important dimension to other studies (Warburton, Scharf and Walsh 2017). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that in case of increasing hidden poverty and financial imbalance, the maintenance of social cohesion will be in danger. Due to the differences of circumstances of life and scopes for action, development priorities in municipalities with a small number of inhabitants will change from the perspective of the poor.

The empirical data are not suitable for a reliable retrospectively prediction of general lines of socio-economic developments in structurally weak and less favoured rural and urban municipalities because of the high amount of missing values and the restrictions of interpolation.

However, an asymmetry in the mayors’ perception can be stated if poverty and material deprivation are interpreted – amongst other factors – as a function of deficiencies of work opportunities and local infrastructure supply. Whereas work opportunities and infrastructure are frequently monitored by rural municipalities – not only for statistical but also for development and planning purposes – deprivation is harder to recognize. This gap in perception may lead to measures at the local level undertaken for companies and infrastructure but not for the poor.

Secondly, the interrelations between poverty and deprivation and work opportunities, infrastructure provision and affordable housing (the latter aspect has been stressed by Schafft (2006) in his study on students’ mobility within a rural district of New York) might be strong and implies the different attractiveness of rural peripheries for materially deprived or rather unemployed persons seeking for jobs and willing to move. But it leads to a neglect of other important links and processes: In general, the group of affected people is rather dynamic as people are vulnerable or communities can become resilient. Vulnerability to poverty is both a biographical and a demographic phenomenon and the result of overlapped disadvantages (Avramov, 2002: 30) as people might be exposed to it during their lifetime, but in ageing populations, the probability to become poor rises. Therefore, women and single moms are not perceived as a heavily exposed group as population ageing in general overshadows their fate. One might also argue that mayors might be more empathic to their (future) peer group. On the other hand, small communities as those in rural Austria face even greater challenges, as the possibility to develop resilience strategies is smaller when a critical mass of actors is undercut.

According to our empirical findings, poverty and material deprivation are still not on the political agenda of structurally weak (rural) municipalities and small towns. In the analysis of the verbal information, we were not able to work out what it really takes to bring poverty and its consequences to an issue of local politics.

As one explanation relates to the politically induced positive perception of mayors, another might take into consideration that coping strategies, informal support and active hiding poverty strategies might lead to a certain invisibility of poverty (Dodson and Schmalzbauer, 2005). Under these circumstances, rural poverty only becomes visible when it has risen to a certain proportion. In fact, both critical masses – those of actors and those of people affected – do not automatically correspond with each other. This impedes timely political discussion and acting, although the overlap of location factors, economic structural weaknesses and increasing costs of living – in particular housing and spatial mobility – can threaten the existences of those who cannot compensate disadvantages from material deprivation and decline of local infrastructures with formal or rather informal support, as well as of those who are not able or willing to move (Biao, 2006; Joseph and Cloutier, 1991).

In general, the observed differences in the statements of the mayors can be interpreted in various ways: as a lack of awareness, as an individual perception of the problem, as an effect of the low visibility of poverty, as an unwillingness to comment on political decision-paths and detailed information on the poor in order to keep anonymity, or even as an effect of an actually low amount of materially deprived people in the municipalities represented. It is never to be forgotten that two hearts are beating within the breast of the mayors.

Looking at the interlinkages between poverty and the development of structurally weak rural municipalities, it must first be acknowledged that poverty and the risk of poverty are closely linked to sociodemographic features. Typical groups being mentioned by the interviewed comprise of unemployed people, extended families, single parents and older people. The ranking of these groups indicate a structural exposition of communities towards poverty as at least two groups (extended families, single parents) can be directly linked to the structure of the labour market. Thus, it can be stated that poverty and deprivation develop differently in different communities resulting in different affected groups. Our study illustrates that beyond socio-economic analytics, perceptions of mayors play an important role in tackling these problems. In their opinion, the origins for poverty and the exposition to poverty are not only linked to structural deficiencies but might also be explicable by individual “inabilities”. Obviously, these findings throw a different light on any attempts by municipalities to adjust the local labour market or improve the provision of health and welfare services. Although international comparative studies provide important insights in the role of national welfare systems and their effect on stakeholder arrangements and actions (e.g., Whelan and Maitre 2012, Warburton, Scharf and Walsh 2017, Bach and Stroleny 2013), regional and local studies must be undertaken to understand the mechanisms in municipalities: Structural weakness caused by and leading to or enhancing poverty and deprivation has a dramatic effect on municipalities as path dependencies are strengthened. However, the observed differences in the perception of poverty and its evaluation, and explanation can be interpreted as lock-in-arrangements prohibiting change. One attempt to overcome these obstacles might be the “Learning Rural Area Framework” (Wellbrock and Roep 2014) as it supports reflexivity, planning and collaboration but is based on an existing framework and arrangement of actors and stakeholders. Looking at the potentials of the cultural capital approach, to explain differences in the acknowledgment of poverty and deprivation might offer an alternative interpretation as the mapping of cultural practices on poverty and deprivation allow for a better understanding of the discrepancies in our data (Shubin 2010).

Moreover, some critical points need to be mentioned: Firstly, the variety of data on unemployment, family status, public support figures etc. to be delivered to the next administrative level will certainly raise the awareness and sensibility for poverty and deprivation. Secondly, the often discussed new approach of governance and civic engagement as participation- and communication-based governing should not only at the local – but also at the regional level (Reyser and Halseth, 2017: 136), at least in theory enhances the possibility to get either in direct contact with those affected or endangered by poverty or with the relevant stakeholders. In reality and in accordance to the findings of Milbourne and Doheny (2012), poor people tend to hide their material situation or stay within their (family) support networks – the latter has a suppressive effect on receiving social assistance (Klagge, 2001: 294). But these networks are not part of the traditional governance systems.

It is difficult to assess how far the contemporary discourses on governance and civic engagement support or obstruct any further observation and discussion on poverty and deprivation. It might be the case that mayors misinterpret the low visibility of poverty as a result of their commitment to governance and their support and trust in civic engagement. The Third-Sector Theory might be useful to explain economic and organizational aspects of civic engagement (van Til, 2009; Castellini, 2013) but there is uncertainty about how it might fit into the traditional planning approaches. Public planning and policy tend to solve socio-economic disparities mainly by addressing challenges related to housing, spatial mobility and recently energy poverty (Bouzarovski and Herrero, 2017). But the creation of low-cost housing does not solve the other housing-connected challenge of un- or underused buildings – as the empirical findings show that material deprived (in-migrating) people do not move into vacant houses; equally, the provision of public transport does automatically improve the employability of poor people when the next work

opportunity is too far away. Thus, it is necessary to find alternative ways to link spatial planning with social aspects in poverty-affected communities. A first step could include the in-depth analysis of available data or the creation of such data through surveys. In a second step, the interrelation of poverty, deprivation and the quality of services and infrastructure need to be identified in order to find tailor-made solutions for individual communities.

It becomes obvious that under the specific conditions of sparsely populated rural areas with dispersed hamlets and small villages, new approaches must be developed. Instead of trusting statistical data or an indefinite perception of poverty and deprivation, decision makers and communities should focus on a quality of life approach. Instead of fragmenting different aspects of public welfare (housing, private and public services, health services, mobility etc.) and searching only for fragmented solutions (concentrated on financial support), a rather holistic strategic (spatial planning) approach should be applied, which on the one hand takes into account the financial and societal restrictions of the municipality itself (e.g., the willingness of people to provide others with volunteering and the response of the poor or people at poverty risks to these offers), and on the other hand, the limits of individual adaptation and thus changes of subjective definitions of quality of life due to (sudden) changes of life circumstances. A first step towards this approach encircles the crucial question of time and the stability of a certain level of quality of life (Beaumont and Kenealy, 2004). Once this dynamic has been perceived, it will be much easier to identify poverty and deprivation endangered groups. Secondly, a quality of life approach will stress the given spatial differentiations in the quality of life itself but also in the coping strategies. Once coping strategies and support networks in some parts of the community have been identified and objectively evaluated, the lack or the invisibility of such systems in other, similar environments might become obvious. That is why any public policy focusing on poverty and deprivation must take into consideration temporal and spatial variations. The relevance and necessity for sustainable spatial development based on the awareness of the importance of spatial and social proximity (especially functional mixing, maintaining basic infrastructure at short distances, affordable housing, demand-oriented mobility offers, prevention of sprawl wherever possible) become evident.

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