

Options for Spatial Action in the Context of Multi-Locality and Rural Areas

Abstract

Multi-locality is a complex social phenomenon and a growing research topic that various disciplines are concerned with (e.g. social sciences, geography, spatial and regional planning). Particularly in rural areas, the interplay of residential presence and absence is linked to some of the most pressing challenges concerning sustainable development, including potentials and opportunities for regional development: mobility, land consumption, housing, social infrastructure, community life, tourism etc. This article contributes to recent literature on multi-local lifestyles in rural areas by examining the differences in associated potentials and challenges in four case study regions in Austria. The research followed a mixed-method approach by combining guided interviews, focus groups with multi-locals and workshops with international experts. The findings illustrate how perceptions of multi-locality vary by socio-spatial characteristics of a region and provide insight on the specific needs of multi-locals. Moreover, the paper introduces planning actions for local municipalities and regions depending on their regional characteristics.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on the preliminary results of an interdisciplinary research project investigating the phenomenon of multilocality in rural areas in Austria. The project was carried out between January 2022 and June 2023 and was funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forest, Regions and Water Management (BML). The need for related research arises because ongoing trends, such as individualization (Reckwitz 2018), mobile and multi-local forms of work (Hislop and Axtell 2007; Bürgin et al. 2021) and a revived interest in rural living (Dettling 2020), contribute to the fact that the phenomenon of multi-locality becomes increasingly common in rural areas (Othengrafen et al. 2021). During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, associated health policies and distancing measures contributed to a heightened awareness for multi-local lifestyles and processes of suburbanisation (Pätzold 2021).

The political and social discussion on temporary presence and absence involves pressing questions related to mobility, reasonable land consumption, affordable housing, new

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typologies for changing residential demands, social infrastructure, community life, sustainable tourism, living and working in rural regions, etc. (Greinke and Lange 2022).

The project focused on the following research questions:

- What challenges and opportunities can be identified related to multi-locality in different rural areas in Austria?
- To what extent do municipalities and regions address multi-local lifestyles in their planning?
- How can identified strategies utilize such living and working arrangements as a resource for the sustainable development of rural areas and what are related limitations?
- What kind of planning and policy actions can be identified for different actors at local, regional and state level?

A mix of qualitative research methods was applied to study multi-local lifestyles and their spatial effects in rural regions. 10 guided interviews were carried out to engage in conversations with stakeholders at different levels of planning. Focus group discussions (15 participants) in three of the case study regions added the perspective of multi-locals. Beyond that, external expertise was integrated into the project through workshops with experts.

The aims of the research project were to determine how opportunities and challenges related to multi-local lifestyles vary across rural regions in Austria and through what kind of planning actions different actors can ensure that multi-locality works in favour of a sustainable rural development. Current strategies and solutions were analysed and limitations identified. Moreover, the project identified open questions that require further research. At the outset of this research, four case studies were conducted in different rural regions of Austria: Gesäuse, Innviertel, Lungau and Seefeld. The four regions were selected based on data of the Urban Rural Typology provided by Statistics Austria (federal institute under public law) and in a workshop with the local project partners. The data set of the Statistics Austria categorizes municipalities by demography, density, accessibility, infrastructure and economy (especially tourism).

2. What is multi-locality?

In the scientific discourse there is no single answer how to define multi-locality. Previous studies have highlighted several factors that make it difficult to delineate and quantitatively measure the phenomenon multi-locality:

- First, its multiple social manifestations rooted in a combination of different motives, socio-spatial practices and characteristics of places (Di Marino and Lapintie 2020), and are closely tied to individual needs and decisions (Weichhart 2020).
- Second, the lack of a statistical basis and the challenges in surveys of actual lived-in second homes (Danielczyk et al. 2020; Othengrafen et al. 2021).

- And third, multi-locality as a form of social practice causes “a virtually unmanageable network of relations, dependencies, and consequential effects”, which require inter- and transdisciplinary research approaches (Weichhart 2020, translated by the authors).

As a result, the phenomenon has received little attention in planning processes and decision-making on regional development (Lehtonen et al. 2019; Othengrafen et al. 2021).

In the German-language-scientific discourse on multi-locality, a wide variety of terms have been used to describe the phenomenon of living in more than one place (Beck 2007; Rolshoven 2006; Weichhart 2020; Hilti 2009; Neuböck et al. 2019). Put simply, multi-locality refers to living in several (multi), at least two, locations (local). The definition by Rolshoven (2006), which is often used as a starting point, introduces additional facets: “Multi-locality means *vita activa* in several places: the active everyday life in its entirety is distributed over different places, which are visited in more or less large periods of time and used with a more or less large functional participation.” (181, translated by the authors).

The classification provides a frame of orientation but raises the question what living in multiple locations specifically means. In order to delineate the studied phenomenon without neglecting the individuality of multi-local lifestyles, the authors of this paper apply the following descriptive dimensions: (1) Spatial dimension: connecting several geographic locations, (2) Temporal dimension: recurring presences and absences, and (3) Functional dimension: *vita activa*, social networks, and motives. We draw on the scientific discourse on multi-locality to build a theoretical foundation along these three criteria and to highlight the differences between our understanding and other notions of multi-locality.

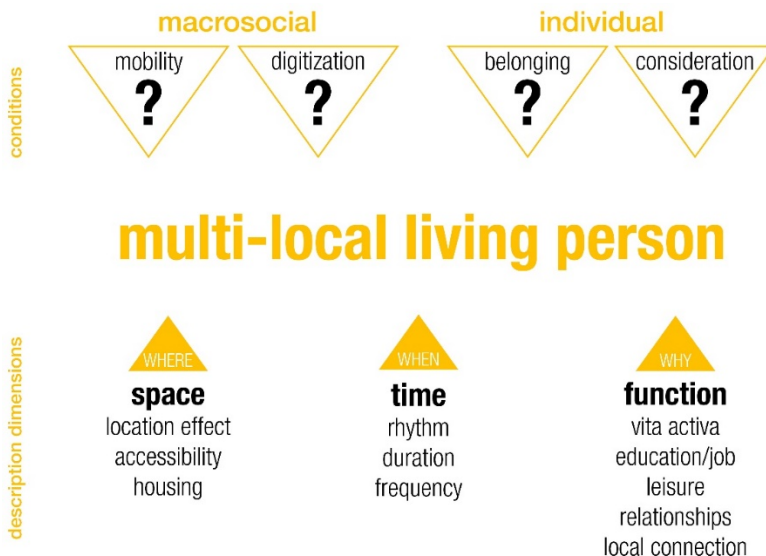


Figure 1: Dimensions of multi-locality.

Individual and macrosocial preconditions are on the top of the three dimensions of multi-locality.

On macrosocial level, increasing mobility requirements and digitization were identified as the most significant factors contributing to a rise in multi-local lifestyles in recent years. Other trends affecting certainly multi-locality include individualization, landlust, rurbanization and pluralization of lifestyles (Reckwitz 2018; Detling 2020; Neuböck et al. 2019).

On an individual level, a social connection with a place and a sense of belonging as well as individual considerations influence to what extent multi-locals return on a regular basis.

3. Empirical study and options for planning action

The reality of life in rural regions in Austria is increasingly characterized by temporary living arrangements. On the one hand, due to an economic restructuring, manifested in agricultural efficiency gains and a related decline in employment in industry and trade, as well as a shift to knowledge-based work and higher education (Hiess et al. 2018). On the other hand, due to changing demographics characterized by an ageing population and population decline (ÖROK 2022). Changes in the labour market and in supply structures increase the spatial mobility requirements of the local population, which affects that “personal, social and labour market networks ... extend over ever greater (spatial) distances” (Othengrafen et al. 2021, translated by the authors). Similarly, the expansion of transport infrastructure and the continuous improvement of broadband coverage facilitate the possibilities of multi-local ways of living and working (Bürgin et al. 2021). In this respect, multi-local lifestyles can be seen as an alternative to migration, which for sustainable regional development may entail both opportunities, e.g. higher activity levels, and challenges, e.g. greater land consumption and traffic volumes.



Figure 2: Selected regions for case study.

Despite Austria's relatively small geographic area when compared to the rest of Europe, its rural areas are highly diverse and characterized by different qualities and challenges. In order to acknowledge these differences and to distinguish the effects of multi-local living in specific rural areas, four case study regions were statistically analysed and spatially characterized. Guided interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in order to identify associated challenges and potential planning approaches, strategies and needs for policy actions.

3.1 The perspective of regional development

Multi-local lifestyles do not cause broader societal and planning policy challenges related to spatial development in rural areas, compared to demographic changes, land consumption and urban sprawl, prevailing car-dependency and high traffic volumes, public livelihood support, social inequality, supply security and climate change. However, multi-locality can reinforce these challenges, which underscores its relevance for the spatial and regional planning sciences, as well as for municipal officials, policymakers and civil society (Greinke and Lange 2022). The challenges for regional planning have only recently been analysed in a few studies particularly addressing rural areas (Danielzyk and Dittrich-Wesbuer 2020; Di Marino and Lapintie 2020; Greinke and Hilti 2019; Neuböck et al. 2019). So far, identified fields of related planning action include:

- Housing markets (regarding special housing needs and housing consumption),
- Technical infrastructures (due to high mobility and communication needs),
- Social participation (possibilities for civic engagement, citizen services, participation, etc.).

In this context, the empirical study carried out in four Austrian regions shows that municipalities and regions have so far hardly adopted measures or strategies that specifically address the needs or effects of multi-local lifestyles. This is in line with previous studies, which also identified a lack of concrete approaches for municipal officials and planning practice (Dittrich-Wesbuer 2016). When municipalities deal with this, it is primarily a matter of main or secondary residence. The background to this is that municipalities only receive money from the federal government for each main residence, but this often does not reflect the reality of people's lives. Some federal states have already implemented regulations to limit secondary residences (especially for recreational purposes).

In the study areas, municipal representatives addressed a lack of data indicating a need for action, as well as limited personnel resources. Another constraint for the municipal representatives was a lack of clarity about the link between multi-local lifestyles and the existing fields of action for regional development.

3.2 Challenges and opportunities of multi-locality

The case studies further show that municipal representatives and planning actors often associate the topic of multi-locality with the Austrian debate on secondary residencies, which pose a significant challenge in tourist regions (Kanonier and Schindelegger 2022), and the issue of daily and weekly commuting. For several interviewees it was the first time to discuss multi-local living in relation to other challenges, e.g. community development and civic engagement. In this context, the current empirical study confirms the findings of Dittrich-Wesbuer (2016), which indicate that the phenomenon of multi-locality and its correlation with different fields of planning require further clarification. To gain a better understanding of how potential challenges and opportunities vary between different rural regions in Austria, the study related the empirical findings to the spatial characterisation and statistical data analysis of each region. The main findings are summarized below in five fields of planning action.

Mobility

In peripheral rural regions, the provision of public transport presents an enormous challenge for individual communities. As transportation issues are closely tied to land use development, low-densities and a lack of mixed land use patterns challenge the provision of public transport and erode the accessibility of regions despite high levels of permanent settlements (e.g. Innviertel). In rural areas, which are characterised by high levels of tourism intensity, public transport services are often geared to the needs of tourists rather than permanent or temporary residents (e.g. Seefeld). Moreover, the findings show that there are hardly any mobility concepts that are tailored to the specific needs of multi-locally living people. Although multi-locals indicate an openness to use environmentally sustainable means of transportation, poor service provision poses a significant constraint to do so. In the analysed regions, service incompatibility concerns the location choice of temporary residents, who often frequent particularly remote areas (e.g. Gesäuse), and the scheduling of public transport, which does not meet the mobility and flexibility needs resulting from multi-local working arrangements (e.g. Lungau). Findings further indicate that poor public transport connections not only constrain the mobility options of different multi-locals, but they also can limit their ability to participate in social life, e.g. in the case of seasonal workers and caregivers.

However, the current study also shows associated opportunities. Especially in areas with low population densities and in communities affected by out-migration, incoming residents are perceived as a potential to increase the demand for underused public transport connections. Interviewees address self-organised forms of car and ride-sharing (e.g. Lungau) and voice interest in business models for e-car sharing in sprawling areas (e.g. Innviertel). In this respect, a better alignment between user needs and new mobility services as well as inter-municipal collaborations are identified as significant development opportunities.

Housing

While the number of secondary residences decreased in alpine regions during the Covid-19 pandemic, it increased in the other rural regions of Austria (Matzenberger et al. 2021). Regional representatives mentioned in the interviews that they fear a continuous grow of housing demand and land development in rural areas. In the future perhaps also due to climate change, as climate refugees may increasingly leave cities. In tourist areas, speculative second residences have for many years put pressure on local housing markets (Kanonier and Schindelegger 2022). Apartment buildings and chalets that are purely built for investment purposes lead to vacancies and drive up housing prices. The findings of this study gives evidence that in this context municipalities are challenged to manage vested interests, which can make it difficult to discuss multi-locality unrelated to the frequently emotionalized issue of secondary residences.

In communities affected by out-migration, an influx of new people, even if only temporary, can also be positively perceived (e.g. Gesäuse). The findings indicate, that an economic restructuring and demographic decline contribute to vacancies and underutilized single- or two-family homes. Temporary residents are perceived as an opportunity to revitalize rural municipalities. While the development of new areas is negatively associated with the cost of providing additional infrastructure, the repurposing of vacant building, their utilization in off-seasons and making better use of infrastructure are addressed as positive impacts within the interviews.

Participation

Findings show that the civic engagement of multi-locals correlates with a local community's cultural and institutional openness to newcomers, which is consistent with former research concerning participation of multi-locals in Upper Austria (Neuböck et al. 2019). This is relevant on a political level, on a public level and on an organizational level of associations and agencies. Multi-local lifestyles are particularly constrained by limited free time, which can be exacerbated by the occupational activities of certain types of multi-locals, e.g. 24-hour caregivers. Results indicate multiple ways how community services and institutional structures can adapt in order to make it easier for multi-locals to participate in community life. On the one hand, interviewees emphasise that cultural and social associations, which constitute a significant part of social infrastructure in rural communities, could benefit from enabling volunteers to participate on a seasonal basis. On the other hand, it became evident that formal and informal contact points as well as intermediaries play a significant role in promoting a welcoming culture and facilitating civic engagement (e.g. Innviertel and Gesäuse).

In rural regions with a strong industry sector, for instance, formal contact points provide social services for incoming workers in order to support their housing search and cultural integration. In rural regions that attract multi-locally living knowledge workers, multifunctional spaces combining coworking and cultural events can create the necessary

environment for informal exchange and social onboarding. In this sense, the findings of this study are consistent with previous studies emphasising the positive influence of coworking spaces on workers' well-being (Merrell et al. 2022). These examples highlight the potential of fostering social infrastructure and services, which cater to the varying needs of specific groups of multi-locals through distinct formats and means of communication.

Infrastructure

As municipal budgets are shrinking and the requirements for public infrastructure are increasing, the provision and maintenance of affordable infrastructure and services is perceived as a considerable challenge in the case study regions. In tourist regions particularly, seasonal fluctuations in infrastructure utilization and service demand pose a significant challenge for municipal financing (Bender et al. 2005). The temporary presence and absence of multi-locals can exacerbate the issue, as they contribute to an over- and underutilization of technical infrastructure (e.g. Seefeld). At the same time, multi-locals can contribute to the stabilization of touristic and cultural offers as well as public services, which represents an opportunity for municipalities and regions (Lehtonen et al. 2019).

Although multi-locals do not necessarily require additional infrastructure (Greinke and Lange 2022: 72), this study shows that specific needs of multi-locals reinforce issues relevant to society as a whole. For instance, the need for childcare arrangements that cater to seasonal workers highlight the oftentimes insufficient provision of childcare in rural regions. Moreover, a lack of high-performance internet connections is perceived as a significant disadvantage in rural regions, which affects the ability of permanent residents as well as multi-locals to work remotely and access public information or services (e.g. Gesäuse and Innviertel). While insufficient broadband coverage inhibits multi-local work arrangements that rely on digital technologies (Bürgin et al. 2021), it has far greater effects on rural communities as a whole. Particularly, since digital solutions are frequently perceived as a possible means to complement and enhance traditional service infrastructure despite constrained municipal finances. The lack of resources in rural regions emphasises the need for creative and innovative strategies, which are often facilitated through digital infrastructure and media.

Work

Deregulation and flexibilization trends in the labour market contribute to a rise in short-term employments and frequent changes in work arrangements, which may lead to relocations (Tippel 2020: 93) and new working practices (Di Marino et al. 2018). Moreover, economic and societal restructuring processes affect employment locations and the spatial distribution of job opportunities. In this context, work-related multi-locality can be a voluntary strategy and lifestyle choice, e.g. knowledge workers who choose to regularly change their working environment and intentionally seek scenic locations in the periphery (Bürgin et al. 2021), but it is more often a necessity. Particularly in rural regions, multi-local

working arrangements are affected by a scarcity of employment opportunities as well as skilled workers (e.g. Lungau).

Study results point towards some of the challenges and opportunities that are associated with flexible and multi-local work arrangements. Particularly in touristic and industrial regions, multi-local workers are perceived as a critical labour force that regional economies rely on (e.g. Innviertel). This confirms previous findings in the literature that incoming residents can provide an opportunity for regions to curb the shortage of skilled workers, even if jobs are only temporarily filled (Greinke and Hilti 2019). In this sense, it is significant that municipalities forge strategies that enhance multi-local working and living arrangements.

At the same time, the study gives evidence that flexible work arrangements enable students and knowledge workers, who previously left rural regions for educational or job-related opportunities, to return (e.g. Gesäuse and Innviertel). While digital connectivity accelerates a shift in working practice towards remote work in the creative and knowledge-based industries (Bürgin et al. 2021), in the case study rural regions doing so is still a challenge. Inadequate office spaces, insufficient broadband coverage and a lack of social contacts with colleagues are addressed as drawbacks. Improving the working conditions for knowledge-workers in rural regions may thus pose another development opportunity. If well integrated, the presence of multi-locals is associated with positive effects of a brain gain and therefore as a contributing factor for the sustainable development in rural regions (Greinke et al. 2021).

4. Conclusion

The term multi-locality is not based on a uniform definition and is difficult to delineate. In planning practice, the phenomenon of multi-locality has hardly been addressed and is associated, if at all, with the issue of secondary residencies, which tends to have a negative connotation in regions affected by high levels of tourism intensity. Due to the multifaceted nature of the term and a lack of statistical data on how many people live multi-locally, municipalities and regions do not yet account for the recurring presence and absence of multi-locals. At the same time, the trend of living and working in multiple locations has strongly grown in recent years. The results of the empirical research conducted in four rural regions in Austria substantiate previous findings (Lehtonen et al. 2019; Othengrafen et al. 2021; Dittrich-Wesbuer 2016) in emphasising that planning actors need to better utilize the benefits of multi-local lifestyles and avert possible negative effects (for instance, increasing costs for housing, high levels of traffic or varying utilization of infrastructure).

Engaging with the subject of multi-locality allows a focused debate on urgent questions concerning the future of and life in rural areas. In many cases, multi-locals have specific needs, e.g. regarding mobility and housing, and raise some challenging questions, e.g. who can or is allowed to participate in what way. If multi-locals are well integrated, municipalities and regions as a whole and ultimately the local population may benefit from new planning strategies and subsequent regional development.

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