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# City-regional cooperation in smaller metropolitan areas. Transdisciplinary research on strategy development in the city region of Kiel (Germany)

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## Abstract

*This paper presents the results of a transdisciplinary study on the further development of city-regional cooperation in a smaller metropolitan region. The case study covers the city region of Kiel in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. Against the backdrop of scientific concepts on city-regional cooperation and based on the own empirical research, central future topics of regional cooperation and possible forms of institutional development were identified in the study. It was recommended to begin via a regional special purpose association ("Zweckverband"), allowing for later refinement options, which were introduced in the form of scenarios. This approach was supported by key decision-makers, but also encountered resistance from stakeholders who were reluctant to give up familiar structures. Beyond the case study, general challenges for approaches to more intensive cooperation in city-regions are identified. Therewith, the study can contribute to current governance research in urban-rural processes.*

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag stellt die Ergebnisse einer transdisziplinären Forschung zur Weiterentwicklung der stadtreionalen Kooperation in einer kleineren Großstadtregion dar. Die Fallstudie betrifft die Stadtregion Kiel im Bundesland Schleswig-Holstein. In dieser Studie wurden vor dem Hintergrund der wissenschaftlichen Konzepte zu stadtreionalen Kooperationen und mit eigenen empirischen Untersuchungen zentrale Zukunftsthemen der regionalen Kooperation und mögliche Formen der institutionellen Weiterentwicklung identifiziert. Empfohlen wurde der Einstieg über einen regionalen Zweckverband, der spätere Vertiefungsoptionen, die in Form von Szenarien vorgestellt wurden, ermöglichen kann. Dieser Ansatz stieß auf Unterstützung wichtiger Entscheider:innen, aber auch auf Widerstände von Akteur:innen, die vertraute Strukturen nicht aufgeben möchten. Über das Fallbeispiel hinaus werden generelle Herausforderungen bei Ansätzen zur intensiveren Kooperation in Stadtregionen benannt, womit auch ein Beitrag zur aktuellen Governanceforschung in Stadt-Umland-Prozessen geleistet werden soll.

**Keywords** city-regional cooperation, spatial planning, strategic planning, transdisciplinary research, regional governance, Kiel, KielRegion

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## 1. Introduction

The Kiel city region is one of the German metropolitan regions defined by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR 2018). The core city is Kiel with 247,717 inhabitants, and the city region as a whole, including the adjacent counties of Rendsburg-Eckernförde and Plön, comprises 657,962 inhabitants (as of 31 December 2022, Destatis 2023). Kiel's labour market and housing market have a significant impact on the surrounding area, which leads to intensive functional and commuting links with the two predominantly rural counties, but also with the City of Neumünster to the south. Together, these four local authorities form one of the three planning regions in the state of Schleswig-Holstein.

This planning region faces challenges linked to the close interdependences between the various parts of the region and to competition between regions at national and European levels. In addition, climate change and the energy and transport transitions initiated by federal and state policy should be met with decisive regional action. Effectively tackling these challenges requires intensive cooperation between municipalities and counties and a well-positioned agency at the city-regional level.

In 2008, the city of Kiel and its two adjacent counties founded KielRegion GmbH, a private limited company, as a joint regional service provider for the "promotion and development of the economy and employment opportunities in the region", a remit which includes regional marketing, the acquisition of funding and the implementation of funding programmes. Mobility management is a further important activity. The future of the company is unclear because the budget provided by the state of Schleswig-Holstein for regional management is only available for three years at a time, and project funding is always of limited duration (oral information from KielRegion GmbH, 2021). Since KielRegion GmbH aims to continue its work beyond the expected expiration of state funding in 2023, it launched a strategy consultation process in December 2019, which was supported by the two authors in the form of transdisciplinary research (cf. Scholz and Steiner 2015; Priebis and Wehrhahn 2023). Transdisciplinary research refers here to a reciprocal learning process between science and society, i.e. between researchers on the one hand and political and administrative stakeholders on the other. The co-production of knowledge on the feasibility of

strategic organizational forms that could cope with the future challenges of city-regional development was key to the project. Methodologically, the project is of transdisciplinary character due to the freedom of the research questions, approaches and methodology. Furthermore, financial resources were available for the organization of meetings and to conduct the interviews. In this respect, there was less focus on elements of concomitant research. Two key questions were addressed between September 2020 and March 2022 against the background of scientific concepts on city-regional cooperation (cf. section 2) and supported by empirical investigations: first, a follow-up of the regional development concept of the KielRegion was carried out to identify the central topics of future regional cooperation. Secondly, the foundations were laid for a concept for the continuation of regional cooperation. The development of scenarios for the further organizational development of the KielRegion was the focus here (cf. section 4). This paper presents and reflects on the main results of the accompanying transdisciplinary research. Finally, the challenges of more intensive cooperation in medium-sized urban regions are identified in general, which also provides an opportunity to contribute to current governance issues in urban-rural processes.

## 2. Concepts of city-regional cooperation

Consideration of the importance of city-regional cooperation dates back several decades, in recognition of the fact that the area of economic interdependence of a large city always extends far beyond its administrative borders. The entire city region faces common challenges and a cross-border level of policy and action is required to address these challenges. "Governing cities through regions" (Keil et al. 2017) is a clear direction for future governance structures that acknowledges metropolitan interdependencies, where the city region is increasingly identified as a crucial level of action. International studies on city-regional governance focus predominantly on metropolitan areas and their regions, such as London, New York, Paris and Tokyo (e.g. Kantor et al. 2012), or address specific questions and theoretical planning concepts such as discursive institutionalism (Granqvist et al. 2021). For Germany as well as various other European countries, there is also research on medium-sized and smaller metropolitan regions, in some cases also referred to as "Regiopolregionen" ("regiopolitan regions") (e.g. Aring and Reuther 2008 for Germany or Purkarthofer and Humer 2019 for Finland and Austria).

In principle, medium-sized cities face comparable challenges to large metropolises in terms of city-regional cooperation. The forms of governance and institutional structures are also very similar. However, reality also shows that despite a broad consensus on the need for city-regional cooperation, the actual integration of city regions varies widely and often stagnates on a low level. There are several reasons for this, including the institutional structures and planning culture, and legal frameworks involving different political-administrative levels. There may also be deficits in intrinsic motivation for cooperation and “learned” cooperation cultures both horizontally and vertically (Healey 2006; Franz and Heintel 2022) or a lack of strategic communication structures between regional authorities (cf. Michlits 2022). Equally relevant is the level of the individual stakeholders on the ground. Indeed, the specific constellations of actors in urban regions in connection with different institutional positions and interests often particularly influence options for intensifying cooperation (Prieb 2018: 93).

To ensure success in the long term, development strategies must be sustainable. Furthermore, climate change requires profound adaptations in settlement development, work and mobility on the one hand and governance structures on the other hand. Against this background, scientific and political demands for integrated urban-regional development and climate adaptation concepts have increased significantly (Kiwitt 2014; Seebacher 2023).

In the course of the KielRegion research, a variety of city-regional forms of cooperation were presented to the regional actors, including examples of other city regions. In addition to the relatively low-threshold cooperation form of the “Zweckverband” (special-purpose association), which is used in Schleswig-Holstein and beyond for a wide variety of intermunicipal projects and cooperation approaches, three very different institutions were discussed as presenting possible options for future governance structures in the Kiel-Region. The Mainfranken region around Würzburg, like the KielRegion, currently assumes responsibility for institutionalized city-regional cooperation as a private limited company (GmbH). An example of a region in which a public regional association has been entrusted with important tasks of regional development is the Stuttgart region, which is also frequently cited as a model region from a scientific point of view (Danielzyk 2011: 25). The Aachen region also provides

a suitable alternative, because here, on the initiative of regional stakeholders, the “StädteRegion Aachen” (Aachen city region) was formed as a joint regional authority for the city and the surrounding area, following intermediate stages with regional associations (“Zweckverbände”). In addition, the Rhine-Neckar region was introduced as a further example because it is characterized by a unique governance structure with both public and private organizations.

### 3. Working structures, processes and first phase of the research project

The most important public actors in the Kiel city region are the city of Kiel and the two counties of Plön and Rendsburg-Eckernförde. The city of Neumünster is not a shareholder in KielRegion GmbH and has chosen to participate in the Hamburg metropolitan region, which borders it to the south. However, the city of Neumünster is important for the Kiel region, both because of its economic strength and because of its close economic ties and commuter relations with Kiel, so it could not be excluded from the analysis (Fig. 1). Other regional actors who are represented on the supervisory board of KielRegion GmbH (and are therefore important interview partners) are the Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Employment Agency. Furthermore, the economic development agencies of the city of Kiel and the two counties were involved, with the economic development agency of Rendsburg-Eckernförde even representing the county as a shareholder in KielRegion GmbH. This shows the strong role of economic development institutions in the KielRegion structures.

Fig. 1 KielRegion and surrounding counties in Schleswig-Holstein. Source: own elaboration



While the KielRegion GmbH agreed to include the city of Neumünster in the investigation, the counties rejected the recommended inclusion of the smaller municipalities belonging to these counties, because they also see themselves as representing the interests of 'their' municipalities. Nevertheless, it was possible to include representatives from the smaller municipalities in the project, at least in some cases. In this context, the cooperation platform set up by the city of Kiel for direct coordination with its surrounding municipalities ([www.foerdekooperation.de](http://www.foerdekooperation.de)) deserves positive mention.

In the first phase of the research project, starting in September 2020, the focus was on identifying the most urgent regional issues for the future (cf. *Priebs and Wehrhahn 2023*). For this purpose, interviews with 17 stakeholders of the region were conducted from October to December 2020. The main topics of the interviews were the assessment of the work of KielRegion GmbH, the importance of KielRegion for the interviewees' own work, and future areas of cooperation in the region.

The results of the interviews, presented in a kick-off workshop in January 2021, basically indicated great appreciation for the previous work of KielRegion GmbH. In particular, the regional marketing and activities undertaken in the mobility sector, especially the establishment of a rental bike system, were emphasized. However, the interviews also revealed a number of critical responses to the work of KielRegion GmbH, with frequent citing of the blurred profile of the agency (mention of too varied and incoherent activity focuses) and unsatisfactory internal structures. In particular, the lack of a clear demarcation of responsibilities between the KielRegion GmbH and the economic development agencies was criticized. The research presented areas of activities in city-regional cooperations from other German city regions to the kick-off workshop. As a result, environmental and climate protection, health, housing and settlement planning were identified as potential future topics for the KielRegion in addition to existing successful focuses (marketing and mobility).

Five two-hour online workshops were held in the first half of 2021 to deepen the focus and examine the viability of regional topics for the future, with roughly 25-50 stakeholders from politics, administration and civil society (plus some from business and science) taking part in each workshop. In addition, the differ-

ent approaches towards intermunicipal cooperation in the sub-regions of the KielRegion were discussed in a separate workshop. The existing core topics of KielRegion GmbH (in particular mobility and regional marketing) were clearly approved and the fields of "climate protection" and "health" also met with a good response. In the longer term, the takeover of the public transport authority and a commitment to regional planning were also considered appropriate. The annual regional conference of KielRegion GmbH, which was held online at the end of the first project phase in June 2021, also demonstrated broad approval of the results of the workshops. Subsequently, KielRegion GmbH immediately began with the conceptual implementation of the proposals and has since based its positioning on the fields of economy and work, mobility, climate and health. Although this did not particularly sharpen the profile externally, the fields of action were clearly specified.

#### **4. Scenarios for the consolidation of regional cooperation and recommendations for their implementation**

From summer 2021, the second phase of the project focused on the task of developing a "continuation concept for regional cooperation", for which "three to five scenarios for regional cooperation in the KielRegion" were to be developed with "legal form, organizational structure and financing options" (cf. *Priebs and Wehrhahn 2023: 2*).

To start the concrete discussion on organizational models of future governance in the KielRegion, a workshop on "Cooperation and Organizational Forms of Regions" was held in October 2021, jointly organized by KielRegion GmbH and Kiel University. After an introductory overview of possible legal and organizational forms by the accompanying researchers, the respective organizations were presented by experts from three model regions mentioned above and then discussed in the plenum. The examples presented confirmed that there is considerable variety between city regions (understood as entities of cities and surrounding municipalities and/or counties) with regard to their size, their legal structure and their respective tasks. It also emerged, however, that solutions that were accepted as daily practice in one region were considered utopian in another. Thus, for further work in the Kiel region, it quickly became clear that more demanding organizational models, such as that

of the Verband Region Stuttgart and the StädteRegion Aachen, were unrealistic. Rather, the model of the “Zweckverband” proved of interest to several stakeholders. This model is comparatively easy to implement because it has a tried and tested legal basis and the members pay a levy to finance the association’s tasks.

As a result of the second phase of the project, in the final report (cf. *Priebs and Wehrhahn 2023*) four scenarios for the further development of KielRegion GmbH were presented, ranging from a pragmatic adjustment of the GmbH form to comprehensive institutional regionalization (cf. *Box 1*). It was recommended to initiate more intensive cooperation by forming a special-purpose association for regional development issues, in which the city of Kiel, the counties of Plön and Rendsburg-Eckernförde and, if possible, the city of Neumünster should participate. With the “Zweckverband”, a familiar and well-proven organizational form was deliberately chosen to create a largely independent, regional political decision-making level. The possibility of reorganization by mid-2023 was outlined in a timeline.

*Box 1 Proposed scenarios for the future enhancement of the KielRegion. Source: Priebs and Wehrhahn 2023: 24, modified*

Scenario “Pragmatic adjustment of the GmbH form”  
Scenario “New basis for shaping the future”  
Scenario “Active regionalization”  
Scenario “Extensive regionalization”

In the first months of 2022, the final report of the concomitant research was presented and discussed in various forums of regional stakeholders. Once again, the “Zweckverband” was supported by several stakeholders. However, some stakeholders repeatedly argued that it would also be possible to continue working with the GmbH form. The economic development institutions accepted the regional linkages in principle, but nevertheless made clear that they were reluctant to surrender their own responsibilities in favour of a stronger regional entity. In a joint meeting of the supervisory board and steering committee of KielRegion GmbH in February 2022, management was therefore charged with further examining the establishment of a special-purpose association – always in comparison with the existing form of a private limited company (GmbH).

## 5. Reflecting on the results

Although the necessity of strengthening regional structures to cope with the major future tasks of a city region is accepted by science, the discussions with actors from the Kiel region repeatedly demonstrated that this does not always reflect realities in practice. In general, this resulted in the reform proposals being differently assessed by actors in the core of the region (i.e. from the city of Kiel and its adjacent municipalities) and by the actors from the more rural sub-regions in the two counties. However, the personal attitudes of the actors depend not only on their locations. Even within the Kiel city administration, varying degrees of openness were observed. While the Mayor of Kiel clearly emphasized the need to create an effective regional cooperation body, there was clear reluctance at the operational level of the Kiel city administration and city institutions (as well as in the administrations of the counties) to give up trusted structures and existing opportunities to exert influence. The stakeholders with a negative attitude often rejected academic findings from other regions, arguing very generally that positive experiences with a city-regional level of action could not simply be transferred to Kiel. On the one hand, dissatisfaction with the internal structures of KielRegion GmbH was expressed several times in the interviews and a clear vote was cast in the workshops for an expansion of the fields of action. On the other hand, the option of taking on additional regional public services and spatial planning, as well as the further step-by-step development of the KielRegion, was apparently not viewed as an attractive scenario by some relevant actors. Therefore, at the end of the research process, there was no clear consensus about the further development of the city-regional organization or even about founding a special-purpose association. The audit mandate to the management can be seen as a first step in this direction. However, it can also be interpreted as a fallback strategy, especially since the opinion was repeatedly expressed that the further development of the existing KielRegion GmbH in an unchanged legal form would suffice.

Finally, it is important to consider the extent to which the results of the case study are compatible with findings on cooperation and governance in other city regions or can be transferred to other areas. At the same time, it becomes clear that the variety of organizational models under German law is already so large and complicated that no attempt was even made to include foreign organizational models in the analysis. Moreo-



ver, the formalized cooperation and organizational models are necessarily based on German administrative law, so that foreign models would not be easy to implement either. A direct comparison is difficult because there is no systematic concomitant research on most reform processes at the city-regional level. Some light is shed on the matter by publications of expert reports on individual reform processes (e.g. for the Rhine-Neckar region: *Eichhorn and Spannowsky 2004*) and detailed descriptions by process participants (e.g. for the Hanover region: *Priebs 2002*). Reference should also be made to *Scheller (1988)* on the arduous process of establishing a Rhine-Main region.

The findings on the development of the “Zweckverband Großraum Braunschweig” (Greater Braunschweig Association) into the more advanced structure “Region Braunschweig” are particularly revealing, because in this region there was a similar reluctance to further develop existing structures, as in the Kiel-Region. Although the majority parliamentary groups in the state parliament of Lower Saxony initiated a transfer of additional tasks to such a special-purpose association (Zweckverband), both the participating counties and the large cities refused to relinquish competencies and were also supported in this stance by the top municipal associations. This structurally conservative approach ultimately led to only a few additional, fairly insignificant competencies being transferred to the association (*Hahn 2020: 150*).

This process in Braunschweig was assessed by *Bogumil and Seuberlich*, who came to a sobering conclusion: “It therefore does not seem realistic at present that the constituted region of Braunschweig can be implemented” (*Bogumil and Seuberlich 2015: 91*). However, after several years of monitoring, some small progress was indeed noted: “Since the beginning of the discussion about a ‘Region Braunschweig’ about seven years ago [...] the willingness to think about a change in territorial structures has increased. Moreover, there is widespread agreement that stronger regional cooperation makes sense, even if concrete views on the form this might take still differ. However, the opportunity for reform has increased” (*ibid.: 137*). This cautious conclusion shows how tough city-regional reform processes can be – and the strength of retarding forces and institutional inertia.

In this respect, the empirical results for the Kiel region show clear similarities with the process in the Braunschweig region, although it is not yet possible to

judge whether there will also be greater willingness to change here in a few years. Beyond the case study, the Kiel study also points to the fundamental problem of translating scientific findings into political practice. In human geography and in the spatial planning sciences, exchange processes between science and political/planning practice are common practice, in part also through concomitant scientific research. Nevertheless, despite open workshops and other discussion structures in the ongoing transdisciplinary research process, innovative suggestions, especially those aimed at structural changes, met with many reservations on the part of individual actors in the administration. This may be particularly evident in the case of city-regional forms of cooperation. Firstly, such cooperation involves “soft planning” (*Granqvist et al. 2021: 844*), i.e., it is not “prescribed” and thus of little relevance for actors working in the classical way. Secondly, city-regional cooperations try to break through the safe and familiar regulatory structures of the political-administrative institutions and thus create uncertainty in the usual work processes. Resistance at the implementation level is therefore inevitable in city-regional cooperation approaches and, we believe, can only be overcome by more and professionalized communication, including a strengthening of practical formats of transfer from science to practice. On the part of political and administrative practice, it is to be hoped that a growing openness to administrative innovations in the face of changed socio-economic and environmental conditions will also be evident.

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