Rural Coworking in Europe

Status Quo, as far as we Know

BertelsmannStiftung

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Green Paper & Country Reports

Contact

Dr. Alexandra Schmied
Senior Project Manager
Unternehmen in der Gesellschaft
Bertelsmann Stiftung
alexandra.schmied@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Twitter: @AlSchmied
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

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About the Authors

About Bertelsmann Stiftung

The Bertelsmann Stiftung, founded in 1977 by Reinhard Mohn, is a private operating foundation which engages in evidence-based and solely nonprofit activities. Through its projects, studies and events, the Bertelsmann Stiftung stimulates debate and provides impetus for social change. Serving the public good and having a sustainable impact are the fundamental principles underlying its activities. The foundation's initiatives not only generate solutions, they also provide empirically sound guidance for a broad public. (www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

About CoWorkLand

In February 2019, the CoWorkLand cooperative was founded by people who want to start a coworking space in rural areas and operate it based on coworking values. The goal of the cooperative is to support its members in founding and operating coworking spaces at all levels and to give its customers the opportunity to work location-independently in as many places in rural areas as possible. CoWorkLand wants to network its members with each other, so that a broad and constant exchange of experience is created, from which everyone benefits. It qualifies and advises, supports by marketing as well as its reservation and account platform. The focus is on sustainable and public welfare-oriented management.

Tobias Kremkau

Tobias Kremkau is a consultant and development officer at CoWorkLand eG. Before that, he was Head of Coworking at the Berlin coworking pioneer St. Oberholz for over five years. Tobias thinks, writes, speaks, and consults on the topics of Coworking and New Work. He is one of the co-founders of the German Coworking Federation e.V. (GCF). In 2019, Tobias was named one of the 100 most influential young East Germans by ZEIT.

Dr. Alexandra Schmied

Alexandra Schmied is a senior project manager at the Bertelsmann Stiftung and has been researching the topic of Livable Working Enviroments for several years. Her work focusses on organizational development, healthy working conditions, new work, remote work, rural coworking, sustainability and community foundations.

Johanna Voll

Johanna Voll is one of the co-founders of the Coworking Library. She has taught and researched the subject of the reorganisation of work at the European University Viadrina. As board member of the German Coworking Federation e.V. as well as of the European Coworking Assembly, she connects researchers and organises (virtual) events. She is the Global Head of Operations at included.co and a coworking space in an old brewery in Halle.

We would also like to thank the participants of our workshops that were held prior to the publication of this ebook.

Thank you!

1 Introduction

This publication is based on a virtual meeting of rural coworking experts from across Europe, which took place in late May 2021. Experts from Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Switzerland shared their experiences about the rural Coworking development in their countries.

Backround and basis for the conference were the results of a German trend study which had been undertaken on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by Coworkland eG with the support of Netzwerk Zukunftsorte (*Rural Coworking - People, Models, Trends*) published in winter 2020. This publication offered a detailed insight into the typologies of users, founders, and business models of new places of work in rural areas in Germany.

The aim of the Europe-wide exchange was to compare the findings of the German trend study with those in other parts of Europe - to learn from each other and to stimulate coworking initiatives in further regions.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the initially planned face-to-face meeting was not possible. That's why we invited as a first step thought leaders from diverse areas - ranging from researcher to coworking space owners and network creators for a virtual meetup.

Besides substantive presentations of eleven countries, many contacts and ideas have been shared during that event. We learned about creative and innovative projects showing the great diversity of the field and fascination variety of responses to upcoming challenges. And on the other side, we were struck by the remarkable similarity of values of inclusion and sustainability we all share in the participating European initiatives.

One aspect was discussed intensively: The question of the business model of rural Coworking initiatives. There were different approaches on this. Some initiatives relied on public funding schemes from the very beginning. Others concentrated more on private support. But what they all had in common, were the strong belief that in rural areas, Coworking operated as a pure business case, will hardly succeed. From Switzerland finally came the compelling approach, to think rural coworking more like a social enterprise. There was agreement that this approach is worth further investigation and refinement.

If we should name our three main learnings of the meeting, it would be:

1. Rural coworking cannot be developed as a classical business model but needs to be adapted to the local challenges within the specific region.
2. Rural coworking should not be seen as a pure business case. It should be viewed more as a social enterprise.
3. Peer learning opportunities like this event are essential for the emerging sector and should be continued.

The deep insights of the European rural coworking community represented in this meeting are the basis of this publication. Here you will find a brief overview of the similarities and differences we observed, some first learnings and of course the country reports we received.

We thank all participants for their contributions and sharing openly about the status quo of rural coworking in their countries and regions.

2 Status Quo of Rural Coworking across Europe

Rural Coworking is a hot topic. There is a great interest and even though we are still experiencing the different waves of a global pandemic, more and more people are thinking about starting a rural coworking space.

Trend Study: Rural Coworking - People, Models, Trends

Building on the results of a trend study that has been undertaken on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by Coworkland eG with the support of Netzwerk Zukunftsorte, we will take a look at the European rural coworking landscape (Rural Coworking - People, Models, Trends, 2021). The study has portrayed numerous rural coworking spaces across Germany, researched the types of users, business models and motives to found a space. It has been based on more than 200 qualitative interviews with both - users and founders of new places of work in rural areas. We will identify and describe four of these new places of work that can be identified within the trend study in chapter four.

Key findings

1. Coworking in rural areas applies different business models.
2. Coworking in rural areas is socially desirable, but rarely economical in the short-term.
3. Coworking in the countryside works primarily as a network.
4. Coworking in rural areas has a stimulating effect on local communities.
5. Coworking in rural areas is more diverse than in the cities.
6. Coworking in rural areas benefits from different kinds of mobile working formats.

Before we dive into more results of our workshops and additional information, we will give a brief overview of key definitions and the status quo of rural coworking in Europe.

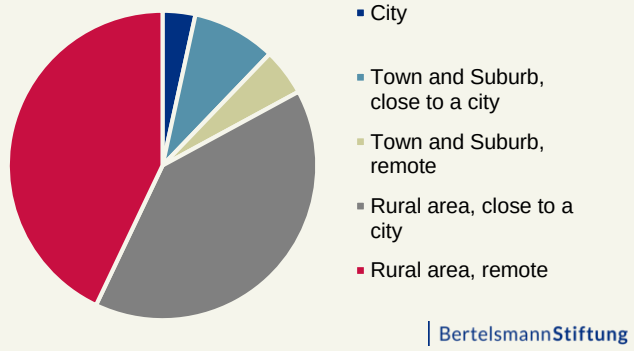
2.1 Definitions: What is “Rural” in Rural Coworking?

The coworking movement is vibrant and still developing. Therefore, definitions are subject to change and can be interpreted differently in various contexts. In the scope of this publication, we use the following terms in the described meaning.

2.1.1 What does Rural Mean?

For the research approach in the trend study by Bertelsmann Stiftung the population figures were taken into account. They consider places up to small medium-sized towns as rural and additional typification based on the Thuenen-Institute were used. These describe different levels for rurality. “According to this classification, around 57% of all people in Germany live in rural areas, which in turn account for 91% of the area” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 22).

ILLUSTRATION 1: **EU land area, 2018** in million hectares and percentage



Source: LUISA Base Map 2018 (EC-JRC)

Other approaches are a bit more hands on, as the German cooperative Coworkland uses a rather broad definition of anything “beyond big cities”. For Germany, Tobias Kremkau explained further that this refers to every city with less than 100.000 inhabitants, which also includes smaller cities as that is where people from rural areas go to use the infrastructure. Up to 70% of Germans live in rural areas according to this rather broad definition.

The European Union uses the geocode standard NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) for their data collection. This approach includes rural and intermediate areas that can be described as peripheral areas (rural areas close to cities). In 2018 rural areas represented 83% of the whole EU, but only 30.6% of the EU’s population lived there (European Commision).

2.1.2 Coworking and Coworking Spaces

We describe Coworking spaces as physical places where people from more than one company or organisation work with one another, but also next to each other. The resulting community is curated by coworking or community managers. The members access a shared infrastructure, which is characterised by particularly flexible usage options. There are various booking options for team rooms, fixed desk space or the option of renting a flexible desk when the coworkers choose a different workstation every day (flex desk in an open space). Conference rooms and areas for phone and online calls complete the core offer. In addition, events or workshops are offered on a regular basis. There is a diverse spectrum from smaller owner-operated spaces, to multinational chains, even though one can argue about the coworking culture in the latter. With regards to rural coworking there are no multinational operators yet.

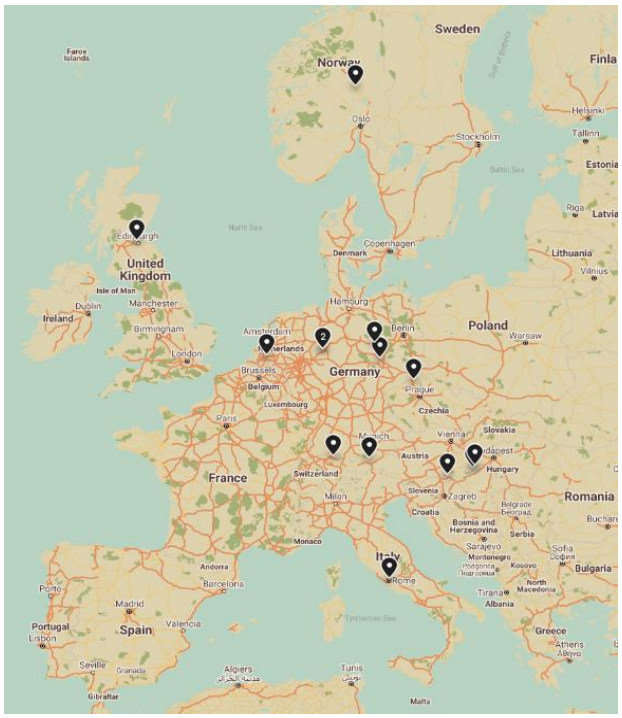
2.1.3 Digital Nomads and Remote Employees

Well known for its notion of an international trend, being a digital nomad refers to a self-employed person who is able to work from anywhere - be it Bali, Mexico or Klein Glien. Coworking spaces offer a great value to digital nomads in providing an infrastructure with all necessities, sometimes even in combination with coliving options.

A rather new phenomenon are the remote employees or corporate nomads. These terms refer to employees of a company or organisation who are at least partially able to work from anywhere and have stated that in their remote work policies. There are different models in the making, ranging from totally remote positions to a model where people are at the office for a few days, combined with the flexibility of remote work during the rest of the week. Other forms might include camper nomads or van lifers. These are people living in their vehicles and traveling either for fun or out of necessity. The new work nomadism has also a negative side as we currently see, for example in the USA with work campers traveling to rather low paying seasonal jobs who are far away from the digital nomad lifestyle one might have in mind. We will take a look at the changing work patterns within the Covid-19 pandemic in chapter seven.

Photo: Rayaworx, Santanyí, Mallorca, Spain

2.2 Rural Coworking in Europe



The rural coworking scene is very differently developed across Europe. As always when trying to give an overview of an ever-changing area of our lives, we can only provide a snapshot of what we think we know. Some coworking spaces might still be hidden and cannot be found easily. We also know of a lot of initiatives that are in the making but not visible yet.

There are rather developed countries like Germany, Switzerland, Italy, but also Norway. Thanks to national initiatives and networks these are more visible than countries where the scene is yet to be developed further, like Czechia or Hungary. In chapter three we provide an overview of several country reports.

Nevertheless, sharing the existing initiatives is already valuable, but we need more data to explain how the overall situation is developing. With our gathering of European experts, we took a first step in that direction and will continue the conversation (see chapter seven).

Six dimensions of coworkability

- Technical skills and tools: Coworkers organize their work digitally. They carry it on their laptop into the coworking space and take it back with them in the evening, they organise their work tools in various apps and online services, communicate digitally and manage their data in the cloud.
- Freedom: Rural coworkers can decide on the place and time of their work as autonomously as possible, and in this respect, they are not subject to instructions from management or to strict company or legal regulations.
- Knowledge workers: Coworkers are knowledge workers – their main tool is a laptop. The higher the proportion of working time spent at a desk, the higher the coworkability of a job description.
- Team and trust culture: The New Rural Workers are on the move, but not as loners, in fact they forces to their need to form agile, digital teams based on a culture of trust. The team members could be sitting very close by or even living on another continent.
- Network beats hierarchy: The New Rural Workers maintain their professional reputation in digital and real networks. They don't have a career that requires permanent presence on the ground and perception by superiors. They develop their brand. They can do this from anywhere in the world where they have access to these networks.
- New work-life balance: The New Rural Workers work to suit their life, they design their working life very individually. The nine-to-five, the pace of the urban office worker, is foreign to them. They highly value designing their working methods individually and varying them time and time again. Work must fit in with life, and not the other way round.

The trend study about the German rural coworking landscape identified six dimensions of coworkability. These are “internal and external conditions that enable the New Rural Workers” and their work and lifestyle” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 15).

These dimensions could be observed beyond a fixed age group, profession, or educational background, making rural coworking users - the New Rural Workers - a diverse and large group. This is one of the main reasons why rural coworking will gain even more attraction as work patterns are changing dramatically.

As an example, we can attribute digital nomads or corporate nomads with a high coworkability factor. Traditionally employees had a rather low coworkability. But with the Covid-19 pandemic this has changed as many people have been forced to work from home, but it is not an ideal work environment for everyone.

2.2.1 Similarities: Shared Challenges in Rural Areas of Europe

Generally, we can observe an increased interest in rural coworking across Europe, especially in the Covid-19 pandemic, during which people have turned to the countryside and less populated regions, if they had a choice to do so. However, there are a few challenges that seem to affect many countries.

As we have mentioned before, only 30.6% of the EU population lives in rural areas (European Commision). In many cases the number of the local population is declining with the result of "a relatively elderly population structure, while being characterised by narrow labour market opportunities and poor access to a wide range of services" (Eurostat, 2020). This is also labeled as "urban-rural split", which means that urban regions continue to increase their population, whereas "the number of people resident in many peripheral, rural and post-industrial regions was in decline" (Eurostat, 2020). This seems especially severe when young people move to cities - which is called the "capital city effect" around many capitals that continue to expand, attracting national and international migrants (Eurostat, 2020). Alongside this effect we see migration towards suburban areas, as well as people commuting on a daily basis to the inner cities. That is where coworking comes into play. The idea of developing satellite rings of rural coworking spaces around major cities, enables workers to work from the area where they live, at least partially.

Establishing rural coworking spaces can help connect people who are looking for a community, either if you just moved to a new rural area or for residents. So far, our analysis has also shown that the concept of rural coworking is still fairly new and much more explanation is needed on various levels to convince different partners, such as banks, landlords or municipalities. It has to be made clear that the business models vary and need to be adapted according to the local circumstances. Therefore, connecting the "spaceship" coworking space to the local population is one of the biggest challenges.

Other similarities of rural coworking across Europe can be found within the existing communities: Users tend to be a bit older in rural spaces, more established in their professional career and less innovation driven, at least in direct contrast to the urban startup culture. People tend to live a more sustainable lifestyle and within rural coworking spaces the community based approaches are the key to their success.

In addition, we observe the growing value of networks. Especially in terms of marketing a space and sharing efforts to learn from each other is important. Aside from that, social and ecological developments are elemental to many coworking projects. They can offer solutions to challenges regarding the economical and ecological sustainability in connection to the progressing digital transformation. And there seems to be a strong connection between coworking and social entrepreneurship.

2.2.2 Differences: Influencing Factors for a Successful Rural Coworking Scene in Europe

In our country reports we show that the status of the development of rural coworking is very different throughout Europe. One major reason is the different extent of institutionalised or commercial networks. In some countries alliances, federations or cooperatives have been founded with the intention to support rural coworking spaces and those that are in the making.

Generally, we see a difference between western and eastern countries of Europe. Factors for this development might include the population density, the varying technological infrastructure, the location in relation to bigger cities and migration patterns as discussed above, especially from young people across national borders. In addition we find different ownership structures due to historical circumstances. We see many types of coworking spaces facing regional challenges, the proximity to bigger cities (commuter ports) or touristic offerings that would make a Workation or Retreat space more attractive in that area.

Even though there is a general increased visibility of the topic, the interest or lack thereof, of the political sphere and policy makers is a challenge, depending on the regional status quo. In some parts of Europe rural coworking is already part of discussion, which also has an impact on funding opportunities through public grant schemes.

Therefore, the public support cannot be taken for granted everywhere. We can, however, observe initiatives, for example in Norway, that are set up specifically to help rural spaces (Business Gardens). In addition, some programs have a strong focus on young people or female entrepreneurs. In other regions it is already helpful if the local government does not create additional barriers as they are not familiar with the concept of coworking yet.

With the positive outlook of the increased interest in coworking opportunities, we are facing various laws and regulations, especially in terms of different approaches to home office and mobile work policies. So far there seems to be a lot of grey areas regarding the legal status when working within a coworking space as an employee. Even if workers wanted to work there, they may not be allowed to do so, which apart from legal restrictions, is also related to the company's individual remote work policies.

2.2.3 Common Goals and Approaches - Making the Case for Rural Coworking

Our gathering showed that the European rural coworking scene is very open to share and learn from each other. Many of the founders of rural spaces have done their fair amount of research prior to opening their spaces. Nevertheless, we need to gather more data to show a more complete picture for all of Europe, as so far there is no sufficient overview as many different initiatives run simultaneously with more networks in the making. Acquiring adequate funding for these networks is a challenge.

There are already various support opportunities on different levels. With growing interest, especially in connection to Local Action Groups (LAG) that are part of European programs such as LEADER, we see more support emerging. A complete overview is missing and difficult to achieve on a European scale.

Forms of incorporation:

Coworking spaces in rural areas can essentially be traced back to four founder types – here we describe motivations, opportunities and risks.

Some (mostly German) examples from these new combination models:

Type 1 Corporate spin-offs
- Work LnB, Beckum, Germany
- BLOK O, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany
- Camp Nord, Norderstedt, Germany

Type 2: Committed community
- Spree-Hub, Fürstenwalde (Spree), Germany
- Die Waldstatt, Großwudicke, Germany
- Wohnzimmer, Wernigerode, Germany

Type 3: Municipal foundations
- Gettwork, Gettorf, Germany
- Fach@Werk, Storkow (Mark), Germany
- Schreibtisch in Prüm, Prüm, Germany

Type 4: Business development and business incubators
- Cowork Nord, Schwentinental, Germany
- Cw+, Stadtlohn, Germany
- Coworking Oderbruch, Letschin, Germany

One task at hand is measuring the social impact of rural coworking and to really work together with the local economy. We notice a great diversity and many different concepts and models that are tackling the challenge of hybrid rural life (see Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 12). Many people would like to live in the countryside but cannot due to economic reasons. Having access to a local coworking space could bridge this gap.

Overall, we observe a trend towards the foundation of rural coworking spaces, nevertheless the motives of founders are very diverse and complex. In Germany the trend study has described four founder types. We dive into these and the support structure around them a little bit deeper in chapter five (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 62ff.).

Moreover, we see very different and new business models emerging. These can be the combination of a coworking space with other services that have had great impact in the region and can help to strengthen rural communities to make these regions more attractive creating a further pull factor.

Find some promising examples on the following page. All of these might have unused space that can be converted in order to establish a thriving coworking community

Further examples of interesting combinations of Coworking and organisations

Coworking & train station:

- Schalthalle Eglisau, Switzerland
- GLEIS 21, Wiesenburg (Mark), Germany
- Bahnhof Sulz, Sulz am Neckar, Germany
- Kombinat 01, Jena, Germany
- Bahnhof17, Güsen, Germany

Coworking & church:

- Gründer:innenHaus, Halle (Saale), Germany
- Gemeindehaus, Hamburg, Germany
- InsSpiriert, Hannover, Germany
- EPIC fields, Kassel, Germany
- Gemeindehaus, Stockstadt, Germany
- Villa Gründergeisst, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
- Kairos13, Karlsruhe, Germany
- Café Luv, Stuttgart, Germany
- Mirabell 5, Salzburg, Austria
- Altes Pfarrhaus, Muri-Gümlingen, Switzerland
- Coworking Space, Erlenbach, Switzerland
- CoWorking Huus, Zurich, Switzerland
- Zytlos, Zurich, Switzerland
- Blau 10, Zurich, Switzerland

Coworking & train bank:

- BLOK O, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany
- Werkbank, Heinsberg, Germany
- Camp Nord, Norderstedt, Germany
- Werkbank32, Mittweida, Germany
- VR Coworking, Tübingen, Germany
- Raiffeisenbank Möhlin Salmenpark, Möhlin Switzerland

Coworking & housing cooperatives:

- K24, Guben, Germany
- Hallo Perle, Perleberg, Germany
- Campus Coworking, Bitterfeld-Wolfen, Germany
- Deutsche Wohnen-Schreibtisch, Berlin, Germany

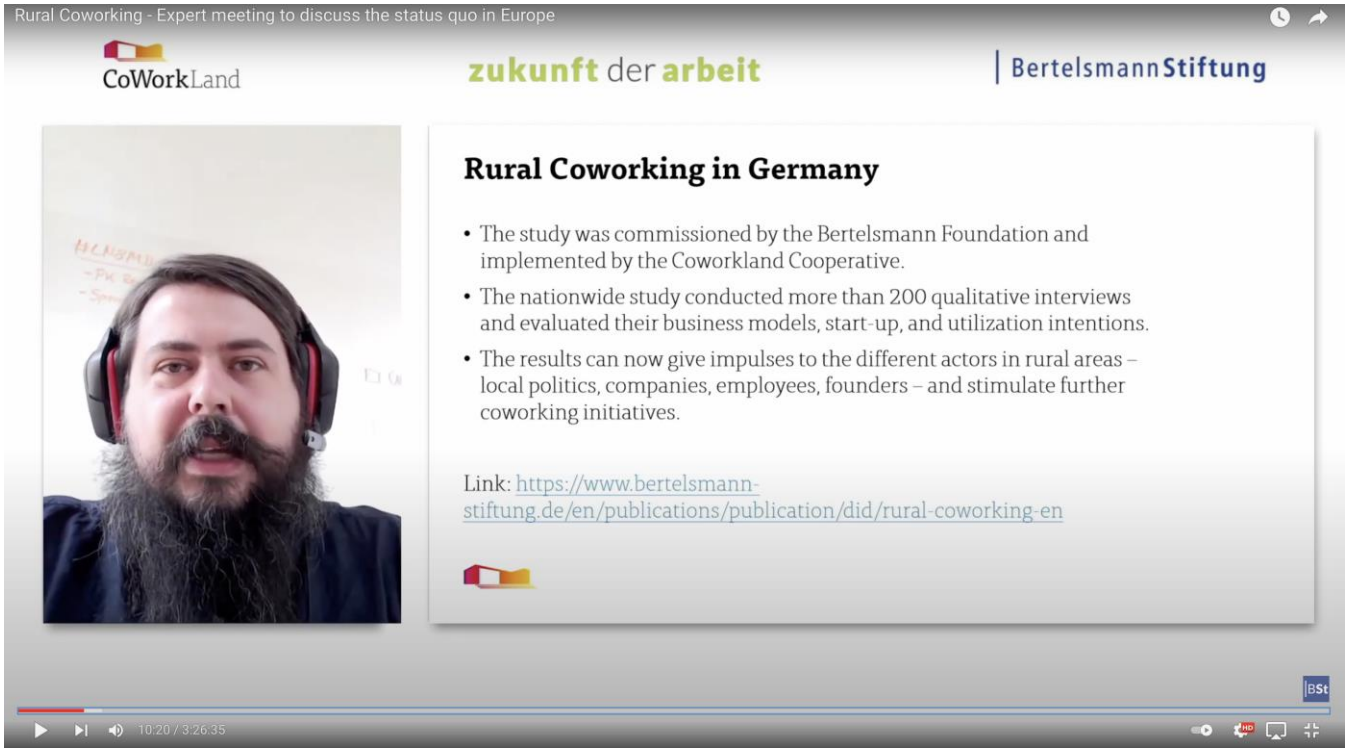
Coworking & post office:

- Macherzentrum Lichtensteig, Switzerland

Photo: Warehouse Hub, Marotta, San Costanzo, Italy

3 Country Reports

3.1 Germany (7:39 – 25:55)



The topic of coworking in rural areas has gained much momentum in Germany in recent years. Rural coworking spaces have existed for as long as coworking spaces have existed in Germany's cities (since around 2009). However, the German rural coworking scene grew much slower than coworking scenes in major German cities. This is changing right now, thanks to Corona.

According to the latest count by the team at CoworkingMap.de, there are around 750 coworking spaces in Germany. Of these, about 150 coworking spaces are located in rural areas. This already starts with cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, so-called medium-sized towns. A small town is defined as one with less than 20,000 inhabitants, and a rural town is defined as one with less than 5,000 inhabitants.

Germany is very much an urbanised country, but around 70 % of its people live in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, thus mainly in rural regions. Since the German constitution enshrines the right to equal living conditions throughout the country, whether in the city or the countryside, the development of rural areas, and thus also Rural Coworking, is an important political issue.

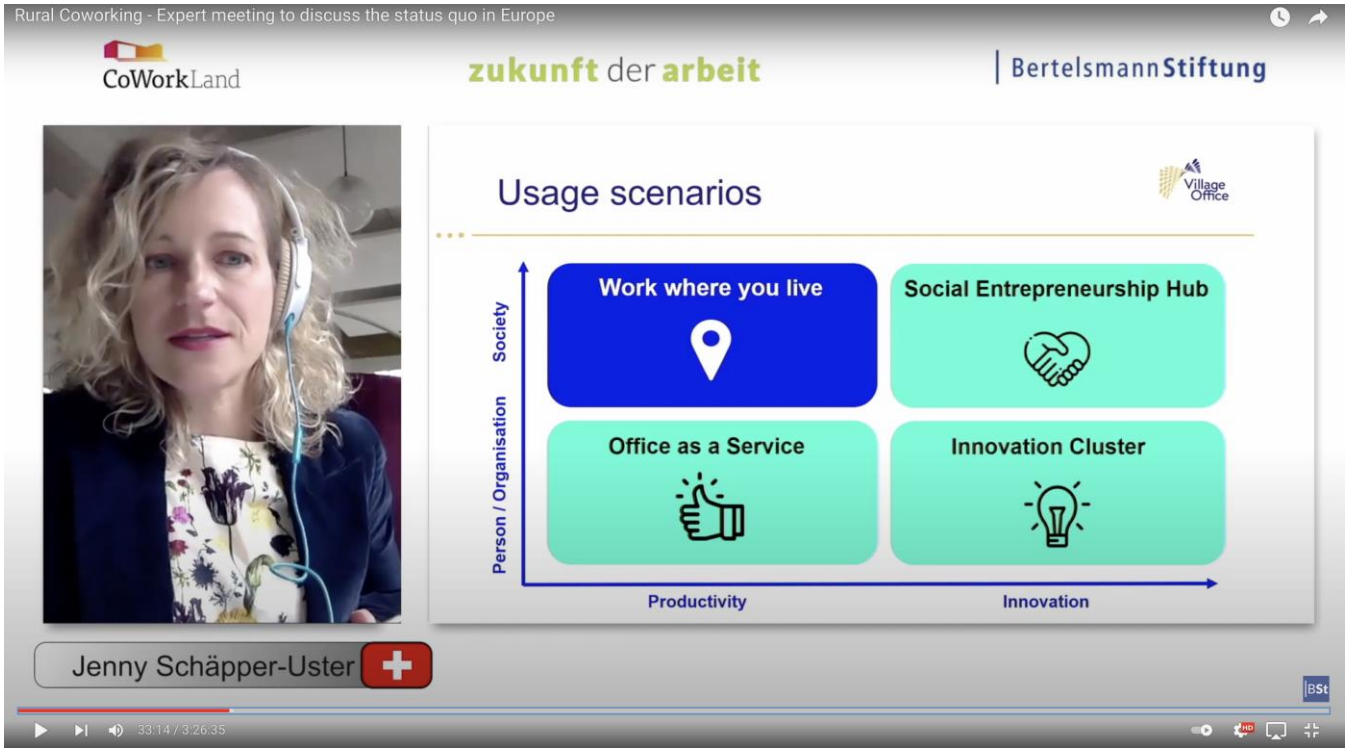
Since the German Coworking Federation (GCF) was founded in 2015 as the first association representing the interests of the German coworking scene, regional associations have also emerged across Germany to address the issue with a spatially limited focus. In 2019, CoWorkLand eG, a cooperative of operators of rural coworking spaces, was founded and was the first organisation to focus on rural coworking.

Last year, the Bertelsmann Stiftung published together with CoworkLand e.G. a study entitled "Rural Coworking" This study evaluated around 200 qualitative interviews with operators, users, and experts of rural coworking spaces. It thus represents the first comprehensive scientific examination of coworking in rural areas in Germany.

Key findings of the study were that

- there are different business models of coworking spaces in rural areas,
- rural coworking is socially significant but challenging to implement economically,
- rural coworking must be understood as a network strategy,
- the communities are more diverse than those of urban coworking spaces,
- and coworking spaces in rural areas benefit from regulations for more mobile work.

3.2 Switzerland (25:56 – 46:42)



In Switzerland, only six cities have more than 100,000 inhabitants, which are also considered large cities in an international comparison. According to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BfS), the degree of urbanisation in Switzerland is 84.8 %. Places with 10,000 or more inhabitants are considered cities in Switzerland. In general, Switzerland can be described as a very rural country.

Of the approximately 350 coworking spaces throughout Switzerland, around 210 coworking spaces are located in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. The national rural coworking scene makes up the most significant part of the Swiss coworking industry. Switzerland has had a coworking association, Coworking Switzerland, and a co-operative focused on rural coworking, Village Office eG, since 2015.

The two most common operating models of coworking spaces in rural Switzerland are the classic coworking space on the one hand and the New Village Centre. However, there are examples of all other categories, except for alternative living and working projects, among Swiss coworking spaces. Therefore, it is interesting to note that work is a more vital driver of coworking than tourism.

The actors behind the start-ups of coworking spaces are very heterogeneous, and no group seems to be numerically more prominent than another. Companies, locals, municipalities, and economic development agencies all found coworking spaces in Switzerland. The fact that the public sector is as active as other groups in Switzerland is surprising, as this is rarely seen in other countries.

A Swiss peculiarity of the rural coworking scene seems to focus on starting a coworking space as social entrepreneurship. This idea is formulated and intensively disseminated, for example, by Village Office. Coworking spaces are primarily intended to help the community and the region. This also creates collaborations with public institutions such as the Swiss Federal Railways.

The cooperative mentioned above, Village Office, has set a goal for the Swiss coworking scene to be aligned with the UN sustainability agenda by 2030. There will be more than 1,000 coworking spaces across the country or about three times as many coworking spaces as today. Village Office will not operate all these coworking spaces itself but will help establish new coworking spaces in Switzerland.

3.3 Norway (46:56 – 1:03:25)

Norway has few urban centres, with officially only 106 cities, of which 60 cities gained this status only after 2012. Only eight cities have more than 100,000 inhabitants, and most cities in Norway have less than 50,000 inhabitants. Most of the country is rural. About 75 % of Norway's residents do not live in a major city with more than 100,000 inhabitants.

There are 100 to 150 coworking spaces in Norway, most of which are in cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants. Thus, the coworking scene in Norway can be understood as characterised mainly by rural coworking spaces. However, by Norwegian standards, it is urban in nature, with one in three to one in two coworking spaces estimated to be located in a city with a population of more than 50,000.

Since 2018, there has also been an attempt to network the Norwegian coworking scene with Coworking Norge. So far only a little over 20 coworking spaces are also members, which seems very little given the already manageable size of Norway's coworking scene. But other associations from other countries also report that it usually takes more than three years to establish themselves.

The classic coworking space as an operating model dominates the Norwegian coworking scene. But the data is very imprecise. For example, whether there are alternative live-work projects, retreats, or commuter ports is not

known. Nevertheless, New Village Centre, Workation, and Bottom Hub can already be found in Norway. Further research on operating models is needed.

Most of these coworking spaces have been founded by local people. In fact, there are examples of all kinds of actors starting coworking spaces throughout the Norwegian coworking scene. Be it companies, municipalities, or even business development agencies. The topic of coworking thus seems to be well known across the board, and various actors are trying to achieve their goals through coworking spaces.

With the publicly funded "Business Gardens," the Norwegian state is trying to facilitate a start-up culture throughout the country. These places are not coworking spaces but are similar to them in infrastructure and help develop target groups for coworking spaces. But there are still many questions about the Norwegian coworking scene, which have hardly been researched. Yet, the first steps in this direction have already been started.

3.4 Spain (1:03:30 – 1:22:56)

Spain is a country dominated by urban centres, with an urbanisation rate of more than 80 %, above the EU average. There are two cities with more than one million inhabitants and 63 large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. For years, therefore, the proportion of the rural population to the total population has been falling. Less than 20 % of people now live in the countryside.

There are estimated to be more than 1,100 coworking spaces in Spain, but only about 150 of them are rural coworking spaces. Almost all of them are in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. So the rural coworking scene makes up only a small part of the Spanish coworking scene, which is mainly characterised by coworking spaces in the big cities, first and foremost the only cities with more than a million inhabitants, Madrid and Barcelona.

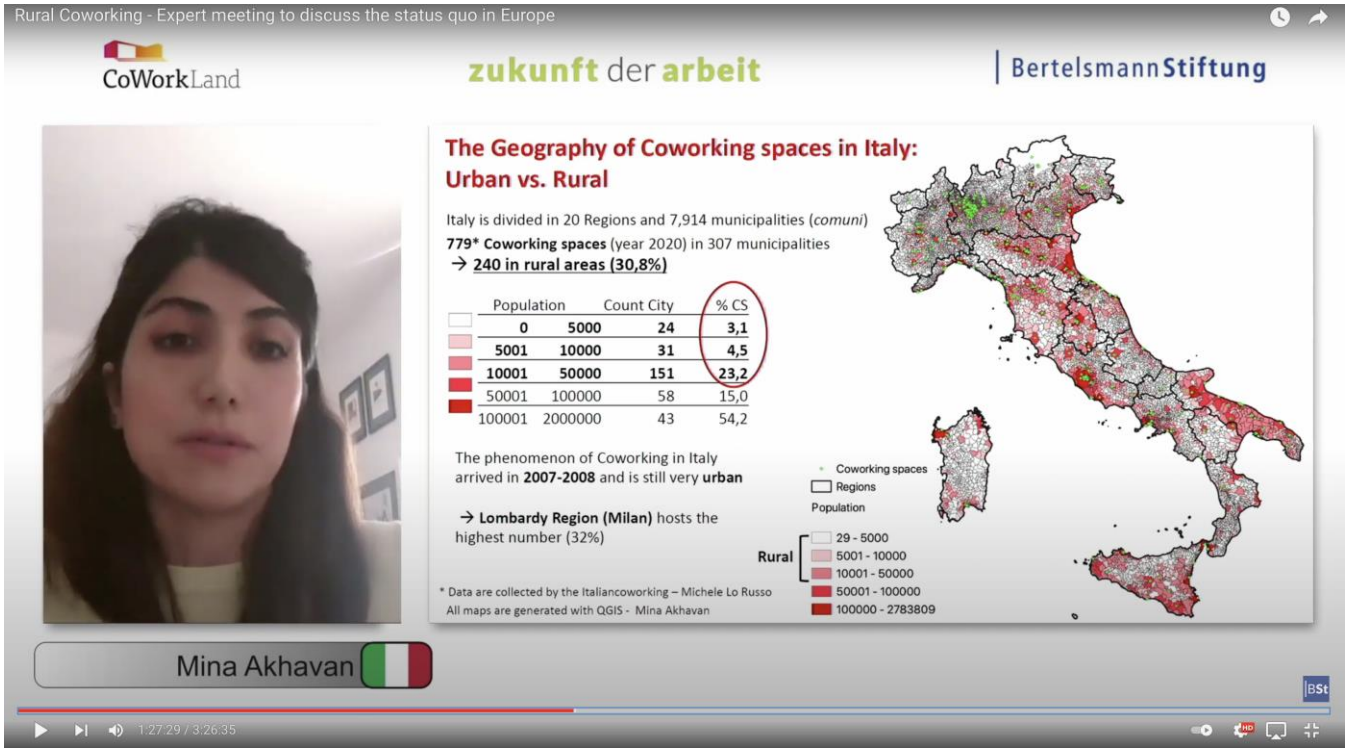
There is no Spanish coworking association, but there are now individual regional groups. Nevertheless, there has been a dialogue between most Spanish coworking spaces since 2010, which led to the online platform and the event of the same name, "Coworking Spain", which brings together the Spanish coworking spaces once a year. So we can at least speak of a Spanish coworking network.

Most Spanish coworking spaces are classic coworking spaces. However, there are also the operating models Bottom Hub, New Village Centres, and, unsurprisingly, in a country with a strong tourism industry, Workation. The latter is offered mainly by Coliving Spaces and does not represent an independent line of business. It is noticeable that there are no commuter ports, retreats, or alternative living and working projects.

As in other European countries, the largest group founding coworking spaces is locals from on-site. Also municipalities and economic development agencies are establishing coworking spaces in rural areas in Spain. Companies founding chains of coworking spaces exist only in a few large cities but not in the countryside. However, this is not observed in other European countries either.

Due to the very dedicated and coworking values-driven actors in the Spanish coworking scene, there seems to be a particular focus on community. This could be a reason for the comparatively high number of coworking spaces in Spain, especially compared to other European countries, as these new places of collaboration could be better integrated.

3.5 Italy (1:23:00 – 1:40:55)



In Italy, the population and the level of urbanisation have been growing for years. Although there are only two cities with more than one million inhabitants, there are 46 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. More and more people are moving from the countryside to the cities, so the proportion of the rural population has been decreasing for years and now accounts for a little less than 30 % of Italy's total population.

In Italy, there are almost 800 coworking spaces. This is comparable to the size of the German coworking scene. However, more than 40 % of Italian coworking spaces are in cities with populations of less than 100,000. In Germany, this is only true of around 15 %. The Italian coworking scene is almost equally divided between city and countryside, but with an intense concentration in northern Italy, especially in the Lombardy region.

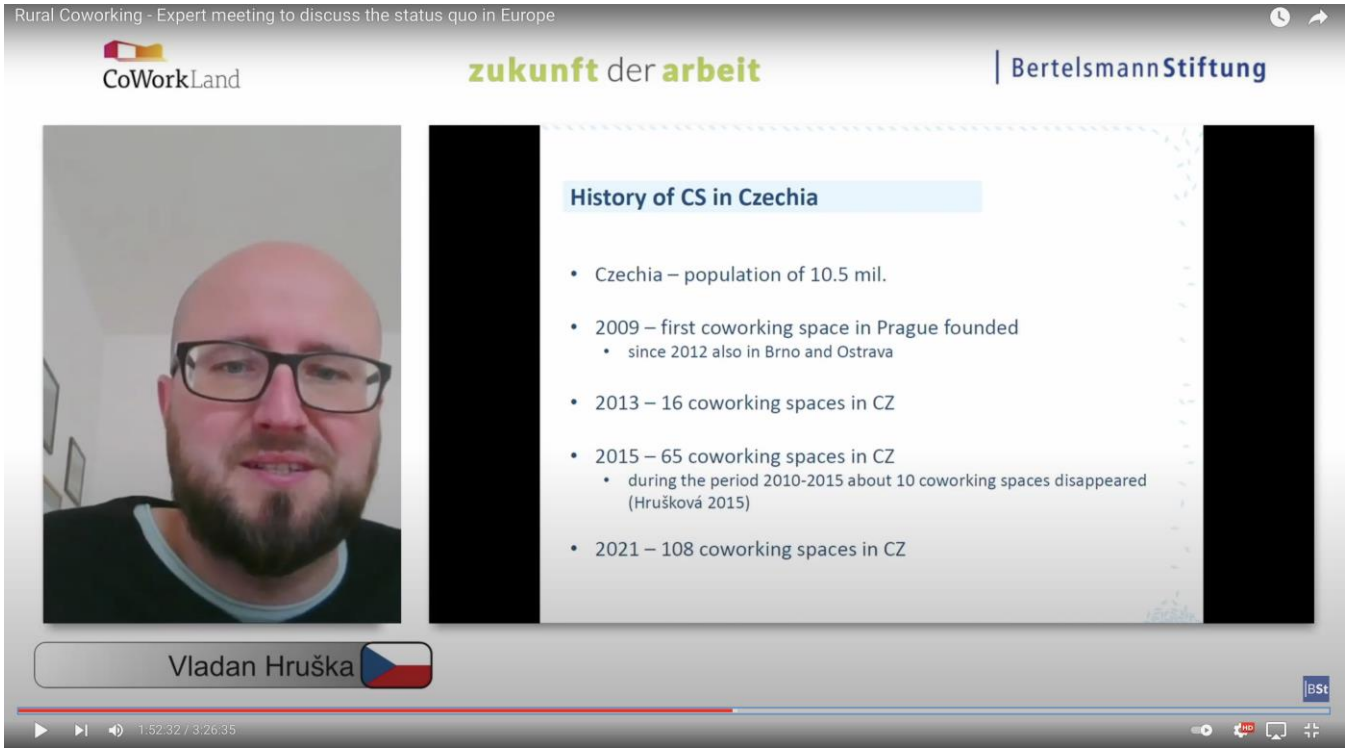
There is no Italian coworking association and no known regional coworking associations. The online platform Italian Coworking represents a sort of database of Italian coworking spaces. It has been conducting surveys of the Italian coworking scene since 2018, so there are a few insights.

At present there is no information about the operating models and the founders of the Italian coworking spaces. One thing is certain: municipalities and economic development agencies very rarely set up coworking spaces themselves. Presumably, most coworking spaces are founded locally by locals. Models like Workation and Retreat are conceivable operating models in Italy, a destination country. However, often they are classic coworking spaces.

In Italy, the global Corona pandemic has had a significant impact on people's behavior, especially regarding work organisation. The comparatively high number of coworking spaces outside the big cities could benefit from this. Other start-ups in rural areas and the periphery of large cities are conceivable, especially to achieve secondary effects such as reducing traffic and emissions.

Interestingly, the previous research on the rural coworking scene in Italy observes that members of a coworking space located in the periphery earn more than when they work from a coworking space in the city centre. In general, members of a coworking space located in a city with less than 100,000 inhabitants were found to have higher satisfaction levels.

3.6 Czechia (1:49:53 – 2:06:45)



In the Czech Republic, there are only five cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, in which around a quarter of the Czech population lives. Even though the degree of urbanisation is increasing, the rural population only accounts for about 25 % of the total population. Around 75 % of people live in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, thus in a comparatively rural area.

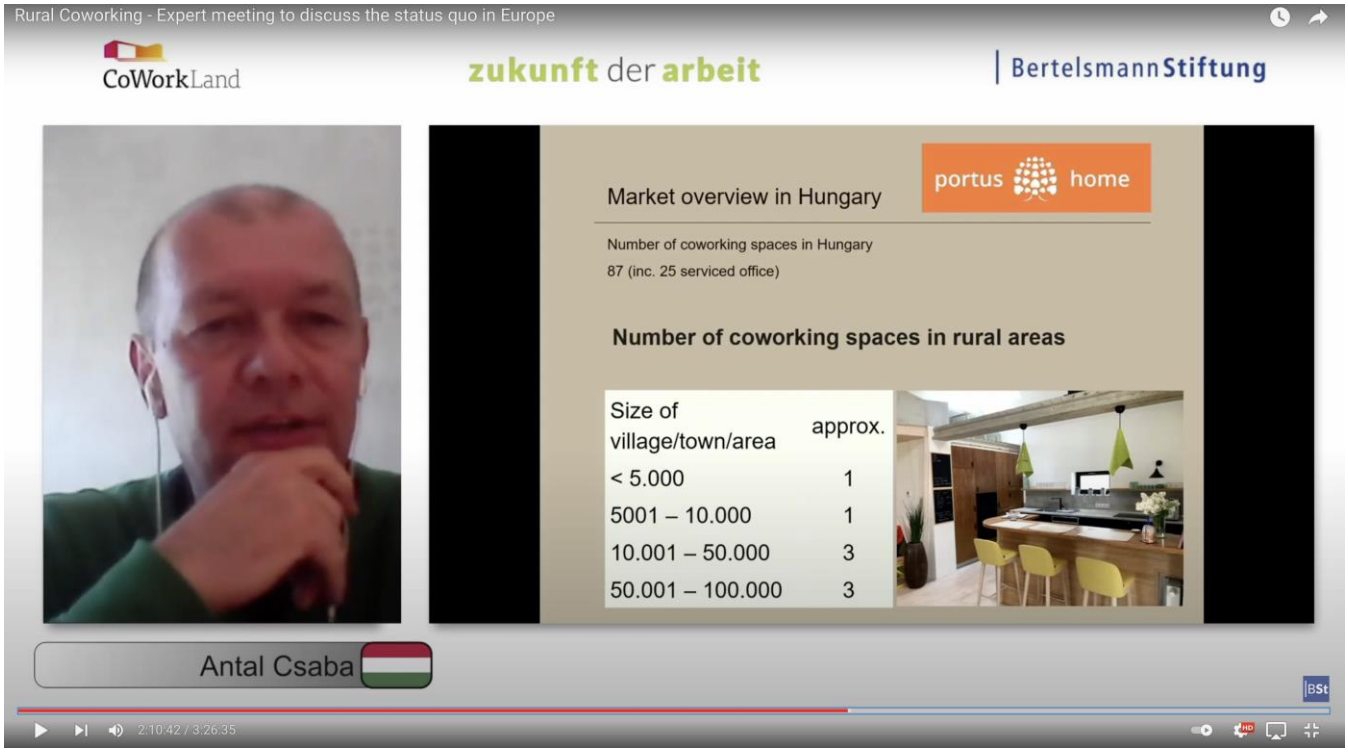
Currently, there are an estimated 108 coworking spaces in the Czech Republic. 66 of these coworking spaces are located in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. Only 42 coworking spaces are in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants and thus more rural regions. However, around 84 of the coworking spaces appear in a town on the periphery of a metropolitan area, therefore not central.

There is no coworking association in the Czech Republic. Locals found almost all coworking spaces. In a few cities, but only in those with more than 70,000 inhabitants, business development agencies have also established incubators, which sometimes have a coworking-like offering. It is noticeable that neither municipalities nor companies have founded coworking spaces in the Czech Republic.

There are various operating models among Czech coworking spaces, except for the New Village Centre. The type of classic coworking space and bottom hub predominates. Yet, there are also commuter ports, retreats and workation spaces, and alternative living and working projects. The latter is still very rare in European countries, so it is exciting to take a closer look at these few operators.

The Czech coworking scene is still not yet very developed. Most coworking spaces are located in the Prague metropolitan region. Outside of Prague, the founders seem to be mainly Czech returnees who have experienced coworking elsewhere. Through them, knowledge transfer can be made possible. Unfortunately, this is not yet possible outside the Czech coworking scene.

3.7 Hungary (2:06:48 – 2:22:03)



Hungary has only eight cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. A quarter of Hungary's total population lives in the metropolitan region of Budapest. Most cities have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants. Around one-third of the total population still lives in rural areas. Hungary has a comparatively low level of urbanisation and can be described as a mainly rural country.

There are slightly more than 60 coworking spaces in Hungary and about 25 serviced office providers, operating mainly in Budapest, like to use the term Coworking in self-descriptions. Only eight coworking spaces are in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. Most of the Hungarian coworking scene is located in big cities, so there is almost no rural coworking scene in Hungary.

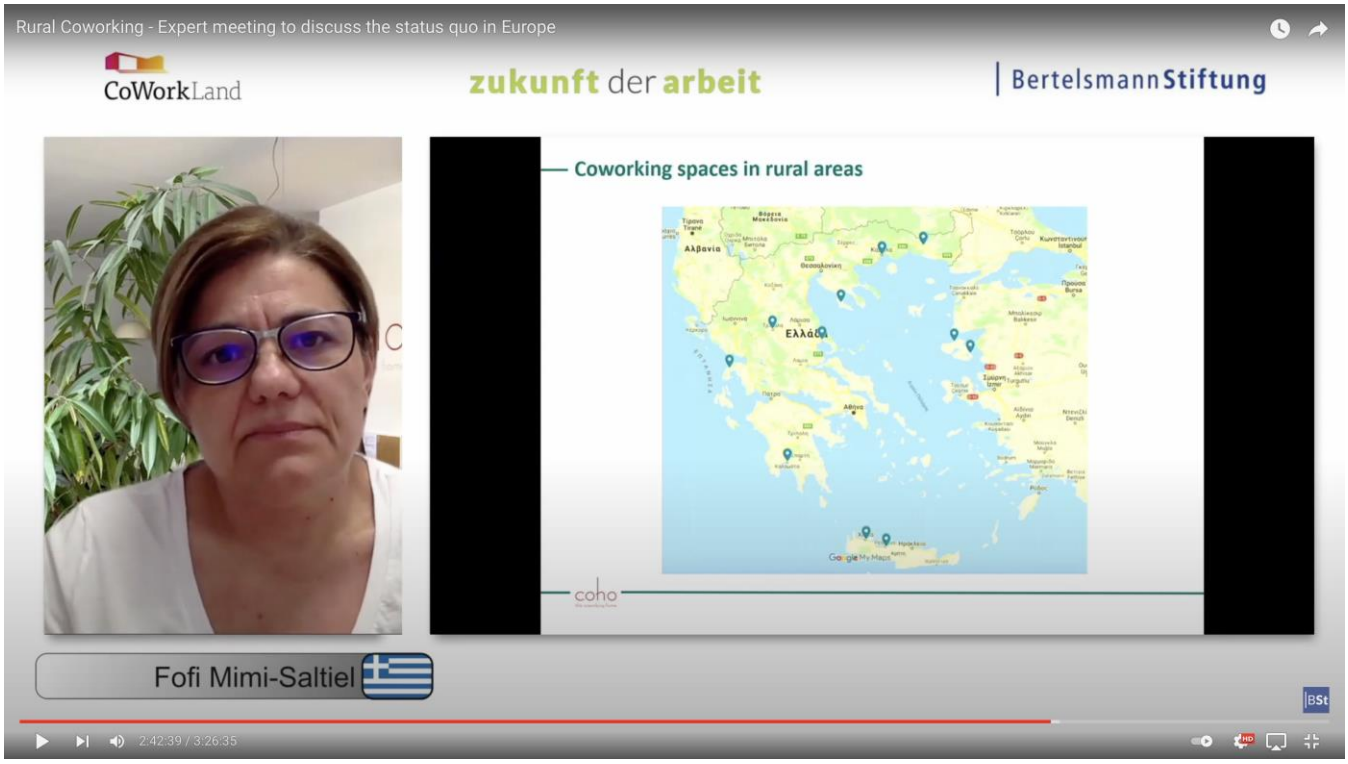
There is no national or regional coworking association in Hungary. With the high concentration of coworking spaces in Budapest, it can be assumed that there is rough networking among coworking spaces. This togetherness does not seem to be organised or coordinated. And given the size of the national coworking scene, this is not unusual, even in comparison with other countries.

Most coworking spaces in Hungary can be described as either classic coworking spaces or bottom hubs. However, as a destination country, a few retreats and workation spaces have also been established. Commuter ports are not yet known in Hungary, nor are alternative living and working projects. It is not known whether places like New Village Centres already exist in Hungary.

All founders of rural coworking spaces in Hungary, no matter what operating model, are locals from the area. There are no known coworking spaces founded by economic development agencies, municipalities, or companies. The latter can be found in Budapest, but they are then serviced office providers rather than coworking spaces on closer inspection.

The Hungarian coworking scene must be considered underdeveloped, especially in rural areas. The intense concentration on Budapest as the capital is understandable. Most people live here, and expats and companies from abroad have also settled here. Still, there are hardly any coworking spaces in the remaining regions. It is not clear whether this could change in the future.

3.8 Greece (2:37:22 – 2:46:38)



Greece is a highly urbanised country. There are 16 major cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, and only 20 % of the population lives in rural areas. This percentage of the total population is decreasing, while more and more people have been moving to the cities or leaving Greece altogether for years. Until a few years ago, the total population of Greece was growing, but in recent years it has been shrinking.

There are estimated to be around 50 coworking spaces across Greece. Most of them are located in the country's cities, and only 11 coworking spaces are found in rural areas. Five of the rural coworking spaces are located on the mainland, and six coworking spaces are found on one of the Greek islands. They differ from each other in their focus on very different target groups.

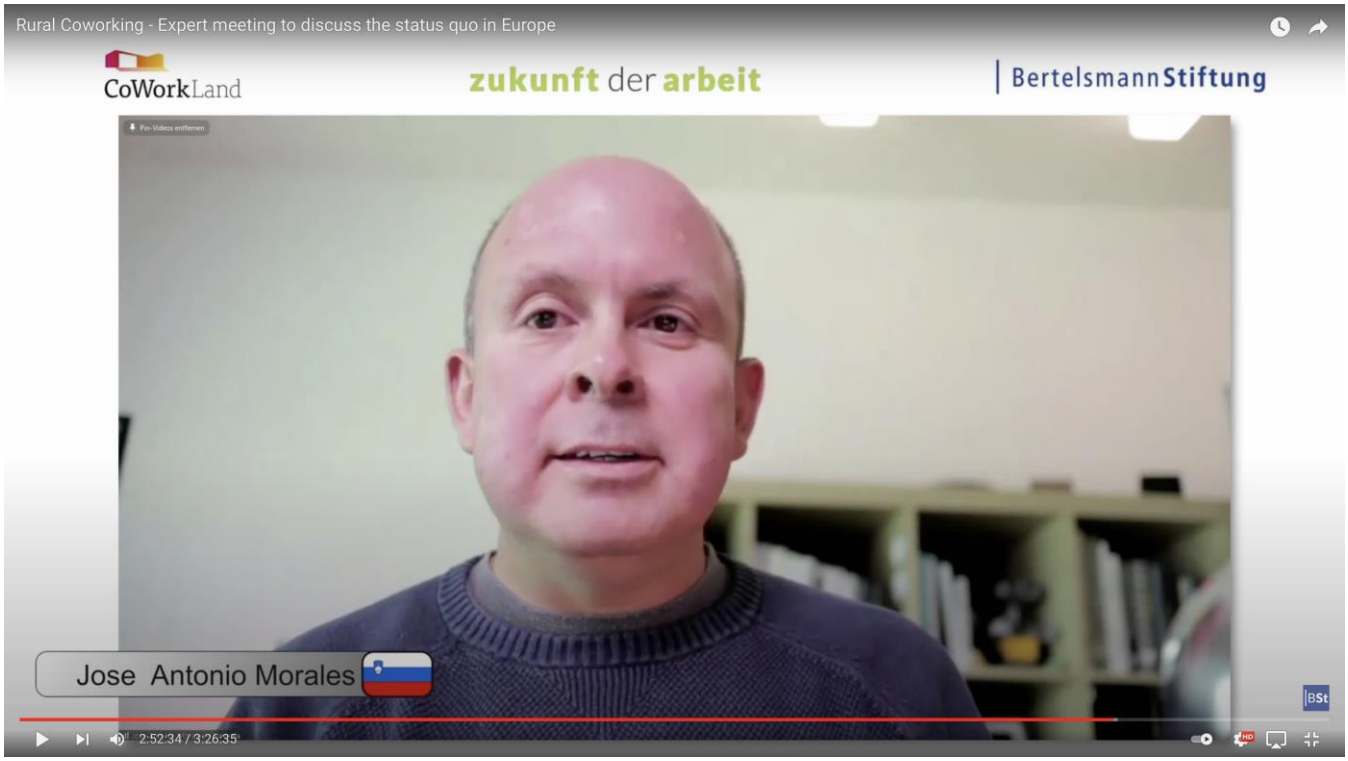
The coworking spaces on the islands can be described as workation spaces. Their only target groups are visitors to the island and tourists, who are to be encouraged to stay longer on site through coworking. The rural coworking spaces on the mainland are in regions that are not popular tourist destinations and can be considered classic coworking spaces. They primarily have locals as their target audience.

Due to tax advantages for digital nomads in Greece, this target group is an interesting common feature of all Greek coworking spaces. This governmental financial regulation allows coworking spaces to have an advantage in the international competition for digital nomads. This target group can already be found in Greek coworking spaces, especially outside the major cities, which is unknown.

There is no national coworking association in Greece, nor are there any regional associations within the Greek coworking scene. The online platform "cowork in greece" is a first attempt to map the country's coworking scene and make it digitally accessible. After a few months, however, there are only a few entries, which also suggests a low level of interest in networking.

The Greek coworking scene has experienced tremendous startup momentum recently, with nearly 75 % of coworking spaces less than two years old. After the end of the restrictions due to the Corona pandemic, more coworking spaces are expected to open, especially in hotels. In conjunction with tourism, the Greek coworking scene can expect international demand and more startups.

3.9 Slowenia (2:46:41 – 2:57:40)



Slovenia is a tiny country, with Ljubljana being the only major city with a population of around 280,000. In second place is Maribor, with approximately 97,000 inhabitants. All other cities have fewer than 40,000 inhabitants. About 45 % of the total population lives in rural areas. Slovenia has one of the lowest levels of urbanisation in Europe and is a highly rural country.

There are an estimated 30 coworking spaces in Slovenia, of which 26 coworking spaces are in cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants. Most of them, 17 coworking spaces, are in cities with 10,001 to 50,000 inhabitants. The Slovenian coworking scene is almost wholly focused on the country's cities. However, it must be evaluated as almost entirely a rural coworking scene.

There was once a national coworking association in Slovenia, but it is no longer active. Slovenia has a network of regional development agencies, technology parks, and business incubators spread throughout the country. In some cases, they offer coworking spaces themselves. This is the only regional structure in Slovenia that deals with coworking.

Most of the coworking spaces in Slovenia were founded by the municipalities or the business development agency. This is extremely rare compared to other European coworking scenes for which data is available. Residents and very few businesses founded only a few coworking spaces. This has probably happened only in the two larger cities of Ljubljana and Maribor.

The majority of coworking spaces in Slovenia are described as classic coworking spaces. But there are also bottom hubs, retreats, and workation spaces. The last two operating models are not uncommon for a destination country like Slovenia is. There is no information on the other operating models of coworking spaces in rural areas. Likely, they do not yet exist in Slovenia.

There are signs of smaller coworking spaces, presumably bottom hubs, being found in start-up processes. This development, should it occur, would be positive for the country's still underdeveloped coworking scene. In a post-pandemic Europe, the tourism industry, in particular, could benefit from more coworking offerings, as can already be observed in other European countries.

4 Best Practices

From the data available, it is difficult to grasp the dynamics and diversity of coworking in rural areas. This chapter uses four examples from countries with highly developed rural coworking scenes to show how coworking spaces may function in rural areas, how they grow, and what their impact can be. The examples chosen are representative of the respective countries. They are distinguished from each other by different business models.

The study "Rural Coworking" examined the German rural coworking scene in more than 200 individual interviews with operators, users, and experts. As a result, the authors found that there are seven different business models in rural areas. Five of them – the classic Coworking space, the Commuter Port, the Workation space, the Retreat space, and the New Village Centre – are essential to know to better understand the four places that follow.

The **classic coworking space** can be found worldwide, whether in the city or the countryside. The essential ingredients of any successful coworking space are having diverse rooms, a productive working atmosphere, and an inspiring community. The original model from the metropolises is on the increase in rural areas, albeit with some unique features.

The so-called **Commuter Port** can resemble the classic coworking space. However, these places have a strong focus on commuters, mostly permanent employees from companies. For many people, the daily journey to the office is typical, which is increasingly supplemented by opportunities for mobile work. That is why commuter ports are essential.

Bali, Bangkok, Lake Constance – not only do young people travel the world as digital nomads, combining their stay in beautiful places with mobile work. In Asia, entire regions are geared to the needs of this particular target group. And now it seems that this is happening in Europe, too. **Workation** Spaces allow travellers to work where others spend their holidays.

New Work thrives on innovative ideas and inspiring places to work. The classic office space is not included. This has led to diverse creative places called **Retreats** coming into being – especially in the rural areas. Here too, people brainstorm, work and laugh – an ideal breeding ground for moments of inspiration and strong teams that is very popular.

Multifunctional places like **New Village Centres** are standing for flexible use concepts in villages and communities. They are meeting places, marketplaces, and event spaces with promising synergies for coworking spaces. Coworking acts here as a unifying element of different actors, ideas, and goals to be achieved.

4.1 Germany: Project Bay, Lietzow

One of the youngest and most exciting coworking locations in rural Germany is the coworking space "Project Bay" in Lietzow. Only around 250 people live in the community on the Baltic Sea Island of Rügen; the next largest city is the Hanseatic city of Stralsund, about 38 kilometres away, home to around 59,000 people. The coworking space was opened by the two returnees Hannes Trettin and Toni Gurski, in July 2020.

The island of Rügen is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Germany. More than six million overnight guests visit the island every year, with its more than 60 kilometres of sandy beaches and historic Baltic Sea resorts, which itself is home to just over 60,000 people. But there is not much of that in Lietzow, situated roughly in the middle of the island between two Bodden lakes. People who visit Rügen very rarely end up here.

Photo: Project Bay, Lietzow, Germany (Lina Müsebeck)

But after about a year, co-founder Hannes Trettin can draw a very positive conclusion in retrospect: "In the first summer, we were overrun and quickly reached 100 % occupancy." That only changed from October 2020 due to the Corona-related travel restrictions, when only a few guests were still working from there. Since May 2021, however, things have been picking up again. The occupancy rate is increasing from week to week.

In addition to the classic coworking space with its coworking workstations, team offices, and workshop rooms, another mainstay in the "Project Bay" business model is the overnight accommodation business. There are a total of 36 sleeping places in different room categories here. This business segment also functioned during the lockdowns, as overnight stays were still possible during business trips in Germany.

In the beginning, of course, it was mainly water sports enthusiasts who came to Lietzow, as it is located directly on two Bodden lakes. In the first summer, students, civil servants, and employees from companies also discovered this place for themselves to work from here and combine their stay with leisure activities close to nature. On average, guests have stayed on-site for a week so far. The operators are aiming for a more extended stay.

For co-founder Hannes Trettin, the fact that "Project Bay" covers the operating models' coworking, workation, and retreat is one reason for its rapid success: "Focusing on one model doesn't work here." "Project Bay" is a coworking

Photo: Project Bay, Lietzow, Germany (Matthes Trettin)

space for local people. Other users combine their work here with a holiday-like stay. The high-paying teams from the metropolises look for a quiet retreat here.

This diversity of operating models is to be further expanded, explains Hannes Trettin in a conversation. A maker space is being planned, and new events will be dedicated to the topics in the region. An accelerator for start-ups is also being set up. Micro-apartments are intended to help newcomers and other returnees looking for housing on Rügen to get started. Local schools are to be supported in the digitisation field.

The "Project Bay" is gradually being developed into an innovation hub and place of learning for the topics of digitisation and sustainability, which the federal state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern has already awarded prizes and funding. Coworking is the nucleus for this development. Other, new, and sometimes only partially coworking-related business areas are emerging.

4.2 Switzerland: Buero Lokal, Wil

"Buero Lokal" is a coworking space in the city of Wil founded in 2014 by Swiss-American Jenny Schäpper-Uster. Wil is a medium-sized town with a population of around 24,000 in the Swiss canton of St. Gallen. Within the city, the coworking space is located outside of Wil's historic old town, in a residential area south of the train station. The city is a transportation hub and is located on the traffic axis between St. Gallen and Zurich.

Photo: Buero Lokal, Wil, Switzerland

The motivation to start the coworking space came from their own private needs. Jenny Schäpper-Uster quit her job as a part-time project manager when her employer abolished the hybrid office model. She didn't want to go back to the office like everyone else. Instead, she started her own business. Her idea was to open a coworking space for other people who worked similarly to her before. Her target audience was primarily commuters.

According to the commuter matrix of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BfS), only 39 percent of the employed from Wil also worked in the city in 2018. The others, roughly six out of ten working people, commute out of Wil every day, mainly to St. Gallen or even Zurich. It is often men who use the coworking space and some women working part-time, for whom commuting would therefore not be worthwhile in the first place.

At first, Jenny Schäpper-Uster wanted to start the coworking space as a subtenant in her husband's office. However, they had to give up the office before she could open it. A stroke of luck, as Jenny Schäpper-Uster explains in conversation. She found a loft in a former embroidery factory in the neighborhood that proved to be the perfect choice over the years. Later, she bought her husband's shares in the joint project to make it her own business.

In the beginning, no one came to the coworking space; Jenny Schäpper-Uster sat there alone. She then networked with the 25 other coworking providers in Switzerland at the time and tried to learn from them. This knowledge exchange about a still very young business model, which coworking still is today, turned out to be a good idea. Soon, after about two months, the first coworking user arrived. He's still a member, Jenny Schäpper-Uster tells.

The operating model of "Buero Lokal" is partly that of a classic coworking space. But as a commuter hub, there is a stronger focus on individual workstations that can be used as part of a membership. This generates proportionately more revenue than team rooms or meeting rooms. That's special because most city coworking spaces rely more and more on revenue from team rooms. In the Corona lockdowns, this became a problem for some providers.

The focus on individual members makes the role of community management connecting everyone even more relevant. Compared to places where there are also many teams, which usually act as closed units. Networking and sharing with others are essential to Jenny Schäpper-Uster in her coworking space. She also exemplifies this and pays attention to it in community management. "Buero Lokal" is a place of togetherness and community.

The 25 workstations at "Buero Lokal" enjoy a high occupancy rate but drop-ins can still expect to find a spot at any given day. Thanks to the coworking space, you can say that coworking has arrived in Wil. It is no longer the only coworking offering in the city of Wil. But Jenny Schäpper-Uster knows no competition. She is happy about the growing coworking scene in her town and how coworking is developing from a trend to a market where everyone can profit due to the increasing demand.

Photo: Buero Lokal, Wil, Switzerland

4.3 Italy: Warehouse Hub, Marotta, San Costanzo

According to Mina Akhavan, Coworking in Italy is still a rather urban phenomenon. There is a particularly high concentration in and around Milan. In the gathering of thought leaders on rural coworking the researcher described an overview of the Italian rural coworking scene. Her data was based on the population number, counting 240 spaces in rural areas with less than 50.000 inhabitants, which account for 30% of all spaces. Only 5% of all coworking spaces are located in very rural areas according to geographical standards used for the study in which she identified 29 spaces. All these spaces are privately owned, only one is a municipal initiative in Lombardy (Edolo Coworking, established in 2017). A predominant goal is to attract young talents and startups to less populated and peripheral areas. One of these will be presented in more detail.

Coworking Space: Warehouse Hub

Warehouse Hub is not only a rural coworking space, but particularly dedicated to non-formal education programs in the field of entrepreneurship. It is a creative hub located in a small rural town in the Adriatic coast in Marotta, San Costanzo, where 12.000 people live. Laura Sgreccia, who is one of the co-founders and Hub director, shared a few insights to the Warehouse Hub's community and their unique story.

Founded in 2013 in an old factory building by Ronnie Garattoni and Laura Sgreccia, the main goal was to tackle one of the most important challenges at that time in their region: Youth unemployment. After having worked for more than ten years in the field of International Development Cooperation, with many years spent in the South of the world between the Middle East and Central America, the couple decided to create a space where talents, creative people, freelancers and innovators of their region could gather to co-design innovative projects.

Photo: Warehouse Hub, Marotta, San Costanzo, Italy

Warehouse Hub was launched as a coworking space, a physical space to implement collaborative practices and a creative hub, a place where different stakeholders could gather. They offer 22 workstations in an open space and three private offices. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic the community had fifteen regular users coming from bigger cities along the Adriatic coast, but also from towns in the inland and rural areas as well as some international coworkers from Germany, Slovakia or America. There used to be many different community events for training and networking events. BarCamps on specific topics, such as design, social innovation, blockchain or crowdfunding, attracted people beyond their lively community.

With the start of the Covid-19 pandemic they decided to keep the coworking space closed to prevent the spreading of the virus and continued to work online in a virtual community with eight members. Now, the space has partially reopened the private offices. Certainly, this has put a strain on the business model and it's financial sustainability.

Most importantly, the team continues their common projects in education, which is an important aspect of Warehouse Hub, as Laura explains: “Our project, going much beyond the philosophy of coworking, aims to create a real ecosystem of professionals willing to share knowledge and opportunities, build relationships, pool ideas and know-how for the sustainable development of the territory and local community, and to support youth looking for their pathway into employment”.

Warehouse Hub works in different areas, with a focus on education, especially for the youth. For that they have designed innovative training programs to develop transversal skills and entrepreneurship, combined with mentorship and coaching for freelancers and startups. These programs have been continued virtually throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, they support companies and SMEs to innovate their organisations with organisational, digital and technological Innovation.

The Warehouse Hub is a great example that shows that coworking has to have a different approach in rural areas and is often connected to another service that really benefits the community around the space. This underlines the perspective of the role of such hubs and coworking spaces as an enabling factor for increased (social) entrepreneurship and training opportunities.

The governance of the organisation of Warehouse Hub is horizontal: There are no employees, but many members of the community lead different projects in line with their competences where they engage other members of the community. The community is made of more or less 30 professionals who were also residents in the coworking space. Now that the open space is closed, teams keep on working on different projects that are mainly managed virtually.

The funding strategy behind the Warehouse Hub is quite diverse as the team co-designs services and projects with companies, mainly SMEs (privately owned), but also with academic institutions, high schools and within EU-funded projects (mainly ErasmusPlus). They are involved in several Italian networks in the educational sphere. In addition, they cooperate with the regional government as well as other bigger municipalities to design educational programs for young people.

This underlines the importance of the Hub's involvement in (international) networks. The European Creative Hub Network played a major role in terms of being connected at a European level. This allowed them to enter European projects and gave their local community of freelancers the opportunity to reach European partners thanks to collaborations, peer-to-peer exchanges, and further shared activities. Furthermore, the coworking space is part of the Copass global network of independent coworking spaces, participates in the Coworking Visa EU programme and is a member of the Alpe Adria Coworking platform.

Photo: Warehouse Hub, Marotta, San Costanzo, Italy

4.4 Spain: Espai La Magrana, Valls, Tarragona

Find out more about the Spanish coworking scene in the recording from our online event here and in our Country Report Spain.

Marc Navarro, who works with different coworking initiatives, explained that in Catalunya about 50% of the coworking spaces in rural areas are publicly founded. These tend to have a focus on the local area and their local economy, whereas the private ones rather focus on freelancers in the creative industries. He also explains a shift from retreat and coworkation offerings to including more coliving components. These rather touristic approaches could work to bring together locals and visitors, for example near the sea, but it remains a challenge to truly connect those two groups. Sometimes it's easier to focus on one of the target groups to minimise the communication efforts.

Photo: Espai La Magrana, Valls, Tarragona, Spain

One important fact that he has mentioned is the notion of existing communities in rural areas: "Do not brag about building an amazing community, because they already have that!" Nevertheless, this community may not know each other in the context of work relationships and that is where coworking comes into play to foster connections. Therefore, you need to connect with the right local people to not feel out of place and be respectful of the preexisting networks.

Coworking Space: Espai La Magrana

La Magrana is the Catalan name of the fruit pomegranate, which is typical for the area around Valls, a small town with 23.000 inhabitants in Catalunya, located 20 km away from the sea in the mountains. The pomegranate has many little individual seeds inside and is a metaphor for the coworking space that Laia Benaiges Monné founded in 2014, when the furniture shop of her grandfather had closed.

The 250 sqm space has up to 20 desks and could grow within the building but has experienced less demand due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, there is an event space for workshops, two meeting rooms and the idea to install more phone booths as more and more people are involved in online meetings.

La Magrana follows a classical coworking business model. But even though it has been running for more than seven years it is not profitable. Laia is a solo-founder and freelancer with a lot of support from the community who help her manage the space and can in return use it for a cheaper rate. She also has created a special rate that allows local businesses, for example regional wine sellers, to be part of the community as partners. Especially with the pandemic, keeping the space sustainable is a challenge. She compensates for that with her freelance job as communication manager and with her coworking consultancy that she created five years ago with two coworkers.

Photo: Espai La Magrana, Valls, Tarragona, Spain

The coworking community of La Magrana is quite diverse. There is a veterinarian as well as lawyers and not that many people from the creative industries. Most of them are fix desk users on a long-term basis from the local town or its surrounding region, who would feel alone at home and are there to find like-minded people. As Valls is not a touristic location, day tickets are not frequently used.

Community events play a major role, as Laia explains. This includes a big party once a year beyond the existing community. There are monthly member breakfasts, workshops, and the format “member of the month”. Here one person can present a problem, and everybody is invited to help that person. Each Christmas a special edition tote bag with a pomegranate themed design from local artists is manufactured as a gift for old and new coworkers.

Laia was inspired to start her coworking space during a European coworking conference that took place in Barcelona in 2013 and realised the value of networks right from the beginning. La Magrana is part of the Cowocat_Rural network and Laia also has worked for this network and their spaces on several occasions as a rural coworking consultant. Moreover, La Magrana and other coworking spaces from the area, have formed an informal network of coworking spaces in the local area, where members can work for free at different spaces once a month and events are organised together. These proximity networks are especially important for rural areas as they thrive on the human connections within them.

Cowocat_Rural – Network of coworking spaces in rural Catalonia

- members are both, public and private coworking spaces
- goal: creation of employment and economic activity in rural areas
- partnerships with several EU-funded projects, local municipalities, and the Spanish government
- Find out more: cowocatrural.cat

5 Support Structures of Rural Coworking

One key learning from the research in Germany shows that rural coworking spaces struggle to develop a sustainable business model: “Rural coworking is socially desirable, but has rarely been economically viable in the short term” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p.7). Many spaces are not primarily focused on creating profit, but rather services for the community around them. Therefore, support structures, especially in the starting phase, are important. On the following pages we will take a closer look at the advantages and pain points regarding public support opportunities for rural coworking spaces.

5.1 How can Public Funding Help Rural Coworking Spaces to be Successful?

There are different funding opportunities through the European entities. We also found out that it is not easy, especially for small coworking initiatives, to apply for those as the process and accurate accounting may be overwhelming. Furthermore, some programs are limited to the European Union member states and are not applicable for all Europe in a geographical sense.

When looking at national levels of public support for coworking we see a diverse picture, depending on the development of the rural coworking scene in the country. Generally, there may not be a funding scheme labeled “Coworking” and you have to be creative to find the right one for you. As coworking spaces are diverse they offer different opportunities to tap into funding schemes that might be available in your area. To name a few: coworking spaces as Third Places; innovation and digitisation; sustainability and impact of global climate change as well as eco-friendly tourism offerings; training or mentoring for marginalised groups (i.e. senior citizens, women, youth or LQBTQI-communities) as well as building safe spaces.

Support opportunities often only include funding in the initial phase. That is the phase where it is needed the most. This can include direct financial support, but also providing space in public buildings or taking over the costs for staff for the community management. In reality we observe that these steps can take a long time: “Often a long phase of voluntary work is required before a suitable funding opportunity can be found” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 59).

One of the biggest challenges is building a sustainable business model after the initial phase of funding alongside making a clear value proposition of the benefits of rural coworking. This is directed at the coworkers who use the spaces, as well as the lack of understanding for the concept in the municipality, which can and should be one of the key partners. As we have tried to show, coworking can bring much more advantages than just providing a new place of work within the rural community (for example the benefits of the concept of the New Village Centre as described in (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 54) That is why the next chapter will focus on the role of the municipality and the relation to local politics with reference to the economic development, for which a coworking space can be a strong driver.

5.2 The Municipality as a Partner for Rural Coworking Spaces

As mentioned earlier, the trend study by the Bertelsmann Foundation has analysed four types of founders of rural coworking spaces (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 62 ff):

- Corporate spin offs: Entrepreneurs or companies that become coworking providers without the financial risk of relying only on the success of their coworking space.
- Committed Community: Initiatives that are intrinsically motivated with a well-established network, oftentimes in need for a space. Here we observe an ideal potential for municipalities to support these efforts.

The other two forms of incorporation, municipal foundations and business development and incubators, will be discussed in more detail as they have a central role as public support structures for rural coworking spaces.

Founder Type: Municipal Foundations

This type of incorporation is characterised by the involvement of the municipality in the foundation of a coworking space. Ideally such a space serves the community beyond the coworking community with services, i.e., meeting rooms for associations or workshops. “This makes it easy to hold a local council meeting and programming course in the same premises” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 66.). Usually, an existing municipal building can be used and converted with all the necessary functions that are needed. Apart from an analysis of local conditions, setting up a temporary popup coworking space can help to test out the concept and familiarise more people with the ideas behind coworking.

Forms of incorporation

Coworking spaces in rural areas can essentially be traced back to four founder types – here we describe motivations, opportunities and risks.

Type 1: Corporate spin-offs (p. 62)

Type 2: Committed community (p. 64)

Type 3: Municipal foundations (p. 66)

Type 4: Business development and business incubators (p. 68)

This model can be differentiated further to the coworking spaces that have been activated by the municipality and later on became their own brands. Usually, the startup phase lasts two or three years before the space might become independent. Other support can include reduced rents in the initial period, refunding of cleaning costs or booking of room capacities by municipal companies (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 66). It is essential to find out about the specific needs in the area and to find good partners, maybe even bigger companies from the region or bigger cities near you with many employees who would otherwise commute.

Municipalities could act as an enabling factor for rural coworking. Nevertheless, they may not always be agile enough to handle the actual operations on site. Working together with existing initiatives is just as crucial as allowing for the freedom to explore this new form of work without too many preconditions. Setting too many guidelines and restrictions in place can limit the initial drive of a founding team. We see that support that leaves room for experimentation can lead to unique solutions and real innovation. Giving up this control and handing it over to a creative team who runs the coworking space can be a challenge. In a best-case scenario such a coworking community can thrive on its own after an initial support phase with help, but also trust from the municipality.

Example: GettWork Gettorf and Desk in Prüm, Germany

Founder Type: Economic Development and Business Incubators

Regardless of the form of incorporation, it is best to connect to the local or regional business development agencies in order to provide access to the local economy. Some are even setting up their own coworking spaces as business incubators. “The advantages are obvious – usually there are existing premises in the start-up centres which can be converted or extended” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 68). But one has to be careful as an “unused office space is not turned into a popular place for local founders by simply coining it a coworking space” (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 68). The role of the community management is crucial, ideally this can be led by someone who knows the region and the challenges at hand well.

Example: Coworking Oderbruch – Alte Schule Letschin, Letschin

5.3 How can Networks Help to Support Rural Coworking?

Apart from funding opportunities we want to mention support opportunities in the form of partnerships with private companies or bundling efforts by joining or even starting a network of rural coworking spaces. Those can be local chains (like Cowork Nord or Orangery in Germany) or regional networks, like CoworkationALPS, which is a cross-border network for the Alpine region. They join forces to promote and market their coworking and coworkation offers through a website. Apart from more visibility for each individual space, this can help with marketing and present a real benefit for the members, i.e. with a member exchange program where users can work for free or at a reduced price from any coworking space within the network. In a similar manner, partnering with an urban space in a city near you can provide the same advantages, especially if you offer a retreat model for temporary stays. In chapter seven we dive a bit deeper into the advantages of international networks to support rural coworking.

Photo: Espai La Magrana, Valls, Tarragona, Spain

6 Essential Learnings from our Event

At our event, based on the country reports, we asked ourselves where there are commonalities in the different experiences, where we can learn from each other, and which kind of support structure would be most helpful. In the following chapter we summarise the learnings from our workshops.

6.1 Business Models: Which Types are Successful?

Based on the typification of the study "Rural Coworking" there are seven different operating models for coworking spaces in rural areas. All the countries presented that the Classic Coworking Space is the most frequently encountered operating model in rural regions. The location type Classic Coworking Space is thus most frequently found both in the city and in the countryside.

Looking at the other possible options on which a coworking space could base its business model, it is noticeable across Europe that the Workation and Retreat operating models, which are primarily aimed at travelers, are found throughout Europe. They enable coworking to address familiar target groups and, since they are usually located in travel regions, convince them to use the respective locations temporarily.

It is interesting to note that both in a country with a significantly developed rural coworking scene, such as Switzerland, and in a country with a barely grown rural coworking scene, municipalities and public economic development agencies are actively establishing coworking spaces. This is seen less often in other countries, each with a similar level of development.

It is noticeable that the Commuter Port and New Village Center operating models, which probably have the most direct positive impact on Europe-wide problems of rural regions, are scarce. Although effects such as reducing traffic emissions, strengthening the local economy, and counteracting the loss of public spaces are highly desirable, they rarely occur without government funding.

There are also very few alternative living and working projects throughout Europe. They are more often found in Germany, especially in the peripheries of metropolitan areas, which may have very different reasons. No concluding answers to this can be found in the presentations and country reports. In their case, however, coworking was also only a primarily separate service for the residents and is not a response to demand.

The classic coworking space probably has the most challenging time being operated in an economically stable way in rural areas. Nevertheless, it is the most common operating model in the European rural coworking scene. It can be assumed that internal effects, such as community building, are seen as more relevant when starting up and are preferred to profitability that can be achieved quickly.

However, the most significant growth potential of coworking in rural areas probably lies in combination with tourism. This experienced industry could tap into new target groups through coworking as a new operating model and develop an offering to meet the new needs of previous target groups created by the effects of the Corona pandemic, which seems particularly promising in the post-pandemic period.

The Swiss path of spreading coworking in rural areas through cooperation with the public sector taken, as seen in the Czech Republic and initial approaches in Germany, seems logical and highly sensible. However, public actors still need to understand that coworking is not a business model but a tool for solving other problems.

6.2 Effects on the Local Context

The European rural coworking scenes are still very young. Even in the more developed countries, it must be said that the first beginnings may have been a while ago. However, a dynamic and high number of coworking spaces in rural areas have only existed for a few years. Therefore, it is honestly still rare to speak of directly verifiable effects of rural coworking on a large scale.

Instead, many benefits are theoretical considerations that seem understandable and are desirable goals. Therefore, rural coworking should be seen as a tool, at least in its effects, that can help with the challenges of rural regions in Europe (see Chapter 7.2.1). These goals also motivate many founders, but they alone do not enable the economically stable operation of a coworking space.

In countries that are still underdeveloped, it is often first a matter of providing local people with a space to work together. Home office isolation, the lack of access to like-minded or even similar working people, seems to be the biggest driver. Coworking spaces can help the self-employed and freelancers in rural areas by being such a place.

This gives working people a perspective to stay in rural areas, where they are part of civil society on the one hand but would also pay their taxes there. As research in Italy shows, this can even be financially rewarding. In Italy, members of a coworking space earn more than members of coworking spaces in urban centres and are also much happier.

In countries with an already developed rural coworking scene, such as Switzerland or even Germany, rural coworking spaces are expected to help re-energise local communities. By creating a different and often new demand, networking with other entrepreneurs, and sharing knowledge, entrepreneurs outside the coworking space also benefit from it.

Innovations can thus also emerge in rural regions and new life models, especially those that focus on more sustainability, find the opportunity to be lived in the countryside. Positive side effects of coworking spaces in the countryside are reducing commuting traffic and the associated reduction of traffic emissions and health-damaging stress that is avoided.

People also stay local as consumers of local products and services, rather than just sleeping in the place while working in the big city during the day. As a result, the local economy also benefits from the fact that people no longer have to commute daily thanks to coworking spaces. However, this also shows the dependence of coworking spaces in the countryside to be part of a still-functioning environment.

The option to now pursue a job location independently in a coworking space also potentially motivates returnees to return to their hometowns. What effect the possibility of location-independent work has on young people who have not yet left and who now also become acquainted with previously unknown occupational profiles in rural areas cannot yet be determined. However, it is worth observing in the future.

6.3 Community Building in Rural Spaces

The topic of community plays an enormously important role in the coworking scene, whether in the city or the country. The community, which is usually mentioned in an inflationary manner as a term, is the actual cement and elementary building block for successful coworking spaces on a long-term basis. How this community is created, what has to be done for it by the operators, how it works, and what defines it, can vary between the city and the country.

It was not often addressed in the presentations, but it can be assumed that only very few coworking spaces in rural areas have professional community management or staff for it. Usually, this is something that operators have to do on the side. But that does not mean that this is a poorer community management. It just means that there may be fewer resources for it.

This may not have a negative impact on the main task of community management, which is to connect the members. However, it can harm how to do it, such as networking through events. Nevertheless, the coworking space members are there to work in a focused manner and not to be constantly entertained by events. These are possibly important to introduce the coworking space.

An essential aspect of community management in rural areas is that communities already exist there. What a community is, doesn't have to be taught to people. Therefore, a coworking space needs to be sensitive to this structure on the ground. This can be more difficult for operating models like Retreats and Workation with an external audience than for a Bottom Hub or a New Village Centre, for example.

In summary, community building in a coworking space works best when a need is addressed, and a problem is solved through the coworking space. This is what convinces people to use a coworking space. After this experience, they are usually willing to open up and also give something back instead of supposedly just taking advantage of the space through the mere use of the coworking space.

The result of this can be creating a social and professional network that did not exist or was not visible before. This enables new options for the individual members as well as the coworking space itself. At the same time, the location's attractiveness increases for potential users from the city, as they can quickly get access to a community just by becoming members.

Photo: Mokrin House, Mokrin, Serbia

7 Outlook: What's next?

We have seen that many people are setting out to start rural coworking spaces, for others the concept is still fairly new. In this last chapter we want to take a look at the possible implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on new work patterns and give an outlook on a European coworking network in the making.

7.1 How has the Covid-19 Pandemic Changed Working Patterns and how is Coworking Affected by this?

Not only has the global pandemic changed how we have been working for the past year, but since 2020 the topic of new work models has become more important than ever. With many people who were forced to work from the proximity of their homes, it became clear that many more jobs have a higher coworkability factor than we had presumed before (see Chapter 2.2). The development that has been ongoing was accelerated by virtue of the pandemic and its impact on all our lives - with positive and negative outcomes. Conclusive studies are yet to be published.

New working patterns have already been emerging with the ongoing digital transformation and an increased flexibility for many jobs. Automation and the rise of the tertiary sector alongside increased numbers of self-employment have added to this development. Of course, not all areas are affected the same. For some people working from home is not an option and the gap between often lower paid jobs (i.e. in the manufacturing industry) and knowledge workers with more digitised job profiles is growing, leading to more socio-economic segregation within societies.

For some the shift towards the home office in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic has been a blessing in disguise. But also, mobile work, the option to work from anywhere, can lead to an increased work life balance and lessen the carbon footprint due to decreased commuting activities and a more sustainable lifestyle. Nevertheless, we have also seen big challenges for parents with simultaneous home office and home schooling or child care in general that need to be addressed. Working from the isolation of your home is not always an ideal option. Reasons are manifold and may include the missing technological infrastructure, unreliable or no internet access at all or the isolated working style with less human interaction.

In the light of these developments local and rural coworking spaces can play a major role, even if restrictions to work from home will change in a post-pandemic scenario. Coworking offers many advantages as a new form of work as an alternative to the home office under the condition that workers can work remotely. A work near home concept can include a hybrid model where employees work from a local coworking space for some days per week, while returning to the core office on others. Coworking serves as a solution for the isolation of people in their home office as they have the possibility to join a community. As of now, we are seeing different reactions to the pandemic in companies relating to their home office and mobile office guidelines. It is expected that more hybrid models will be implemented.

One of the most promising developments for rural coworking, as explained in the trend study by Bertelsmann Foundation, are satellite ring concepts: "This is based on the simple idea of developing a ring of coworking spaces around a large city, so that all employees who commute from the suburbs can find a coworking space in close proximity to their place of residence as an alternative to commuting" (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 60. This model involves municipal employers and an offering for their employees to use these new workplaces, ideally partnering with more and more companies. According to the authors, it is expected that more multinational coworking chains will establish satellite rings in peripheral areas of bigger cities as they have the needed funding opportunities for such endeavours (Rural Coworking, 2021, p. 61).

7.2 A Vision of a European Rural Coworking Network

With so many new concepts emerging it is important to learn from each other to find out which aspects might be helpful to tackle challenges that other regions in Europe are facing. A European rural coworking initiative could help find solutions to these shared challenges.

7.2.1 Challenges of Rural Coworking Spaces in Europe

During our workshops with European thought leaders on the topic of rural coworking we collected our notes in an interactive Padlet. These include finding funding in the initial phase and developing sustainable business models. There are, for example, EU programs available, but those may not be accessible for all of Europe in its geographical boundaries. There is also a lack of understanding and fear of new concepts around different coworking models among (political) stakeholders. Making access to municipal buildings easier is another challenge as this could be combined with other services needed in the area. Such coworking spaces can be portrayed as magnets to attract people as a means against outmigration. Lastly, the internet speed in rural areas is not always as fast as it needs to be for building a successful coworking community.

7.2.2 Benefits and Limitations of an International Network

- a shared visual identity and value proposition
- long term partnerships within and beyond a network help increase awareness
- direct support for setting up a rural coworking space
- mapping rural coworking spaces
- have an impact on European policy makers and help develop new programs to support rural coworking spaces that really cater to the needs of initiatives
- working together with local action groups that are already up and running within EU projects
- explain the concept further to other involved entities
- taking part in studies to better understand best practices and why projects might have failed
- regular exchange opportunities for members of the network

7.2.3 The European Rural Coworking Project

One initiative that has been presented during our workshop was the European Rural Coworking Project (ERCP). It has been initiated by individuals connected through the European Coworking Assembly (ECA) with an overall goal to explore rural coworking in Europe further, identify spaces, connect them, and support existing coworking spaces and those that are in the making. The mapping project of spaces includes coworking spaces in towns and villages under 50.000 inhabitants. So far, they have several community members gathered on a shared discord server and the project's website and started to set up a partnership and ambassador program for each country. These ambassadors are key to connecting to the local coworking spaces. The volunteer team also plans to offer workshops and educational material in collaboration with other initiatives. We invited one of the founders, Jose Antonio Morales, to share his vision of the European Rural Coworking Project.

A Note from Jose Antonio Morales

Jose is the founder of Aurora Coworking as well as a board member for Aurora Coworking Network and member of the European Coworking Assembly.

How long have we been musing about the opportunities of international cooperation? We have tried and tried for years just to end up feeling discouraged by the complexities involved in the process of mutually beneficial cooperation.

I have been interacting with European entrepreneurs throughout the past ten years and learned that theory and standardised methodologies are not enough for their teams to innovate. From empirical observation, I can confidently say that entrepreneurial teams that operate within tolerant and inclusive cultures tend to be more innovative, and in any case, if not successful, more resilient, and even joyful.

An inclusive culture is like magic to support human groups' development. The question is, what do we need to create such cultures?

Let me venture to suggest some answers.

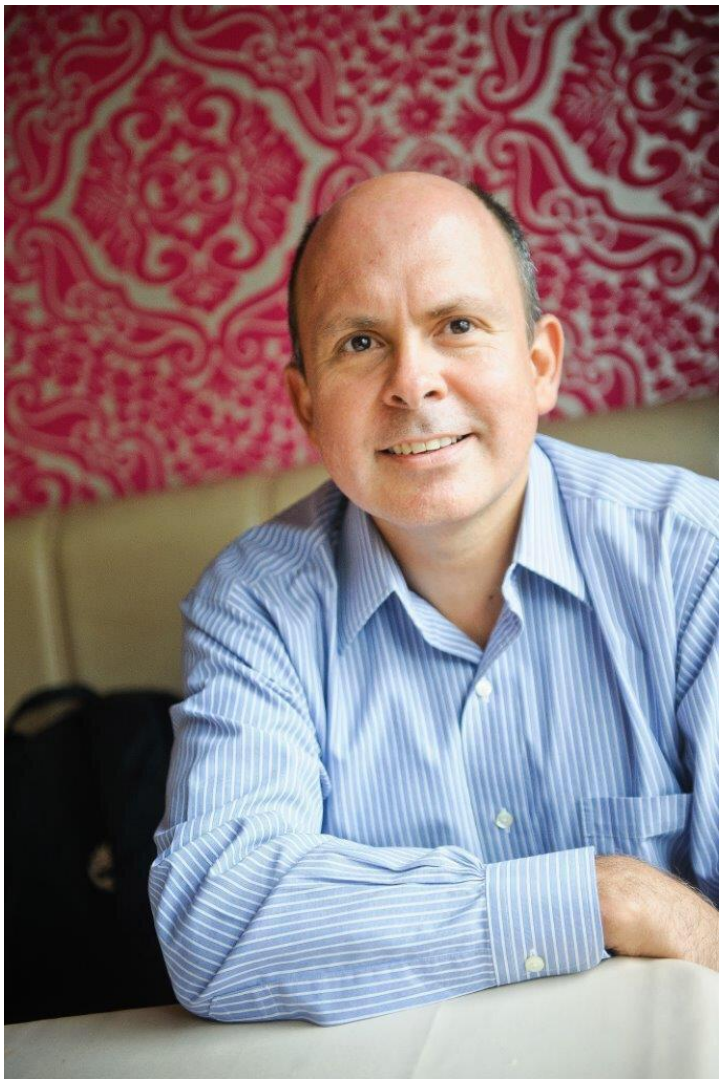


Photo: Jose Antonio Morales (Jaka Koren)

To design culture, we need space and people motivated to achieve something. We need to create spaces:

- Where people participate without an obvious common objective but clear individual goals.
- Designed to connect unexpected players and inspire them to interact.
- Capable of multiplying networking opportunities.
- Where community building happens naturally and not as part of a corporate or business agenda.
- Where the shared values are clear and aligned with each participant.
- Where the collective shares expenses, costs, and tasks fairly.

We need to create coworking spaces.

Of course, I'm biased because I am a member of a rural coworking space in Slovenia, and it happens that I've seen community building supporting and inspiring the coworking members. To me, coworking is an effective tactic to encourage entrepreneurial people to challenge themselves, connect and inspire others.

Can a single coworking space be enough to increase international cooperation? No, but it is a template easy to replicate, and that's why the European Rural Coworking Project (ERCP) exists. Let me explain.

Coworking spaces are operating throughout Europe, under the radar due to their small size (membership) and location. They do create unique cultures, create value, and facilitate connections and economic development. Unfortunately, in rural coworking, it is challenging to leverage more power and influence while in isolation. As the first project's phase, the ERCP intends to identify and connect European coworking spaces operating in cities and towns under fifty thousand inhabitants.

As the number of identified coworking spaces increases, the opportunities for a second phase of the project emerge:

1. Research and publish business models and best practices.
2. Measure and improve collective social impact.
3. Identify sources of funding.
4. Develop additional revenue sources.
5. Increase the interaction between the members of all coworking spaces.
6. Develop technological tools to support existing and new rural coworking spaces.

Video of Jose Antonio Morales during our virtual event: Find more information here.

We know that rural coworking is not the only solution for all the challenges related to international cooperation. With the ERCP, we are adding our grain of sand into the mix; we know that rural areas in Europe need a boost.

- We invite rural coworking spaces to join us and add up to our effort.
- We invite other players in regional development, business, entrepreneurship, research to join us and support our initiative.
- We invite individuals with a drive for community building and entrepreneurship to join our team.

For existing Rural Coworking spaces, why would they want to join?

- There is nothing to lose, participating is free.
- After submitting the registration form, there is no obligation or job to be done.
- There are only possibilities ahead: establish partnerships, increasing business, increasing visibility, and at some point, increasing funding opportunities.
- All participants can join our community server to share information, questions, and answers.

As the majority of coworking operators and users, I love coworking. I see it as a movement for good, well-aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and very much a source of empowerment and citizenship. We are many dreamers now!

Jose Antonio Morales.

The ERCP team is, at the time of writing, run by three volunteers. I am one of them. The European Coworking Assembly supports our initiative.

Resources and Additional Links

International Networks with a focus on Rural Coworking

https://www.colaboracoworking.eu/

https://ruralcoworking.coworkingassembly.eu/

http://creativehubs.net/

European Research Projects about Rural Coworking

Coral-ITN: Innovative Training Network

Coral-ITN provides research opportunities to young researchers about the dynamics and impacts of collaborative workspaces in rural and peripheral areas.
Website: https://coral-itn.eu/

Cost Action CA18214: The Geography of New Work Spaces and the Impact on the Periphery

Cost Action involves 160 research partners from 35 countries sharing their research as well as best practices and impacts on the periphery.
European Union Website: https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA18214Project
Website: www.new-working-spaces.eu

Creative Industries for the new urban economies in the Danube Region (CINEMA)

CINEMA is focused on the revitalisation and support for the creative industries as well as the revitalisation of retail and small businesses.
Website: http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/cinema

Publications about rural coworking in the Coworking Library

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is been granted the right to use the pictures in this publication by the interviewed Coworking space operators or authors as it is indicated below each picture.

Address | Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
Germany
Telephone +49 5241 81-0

Dr. Alexandra Schmied
Senior Project Manager
alexandra.schmied@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

BertelsmannStiftung