

Project *brief*

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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Innovative Approaches to Public Services in Rural Areas: Volunteer Fire Brigades in Transition

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- The reliance on volunteers for the functioning of fire and hazard prevention services in rural areas should not be taken for granted.
- Ensuring fire protection and technical assistance in the long run requires new forms of cooperation between different departments and administrative levels.
- Volunteer firefighters' readiness to accept new solutions can be increased if they are given the opportunity to shape them.

Background and goals

Debates about securing services of general interest in rural areas tend to reference 'good' or even 'best' practice examples in other countries – usually, however, without grounding such claims in a detailed analysis. In the **joint research project** "Innovative approaches to services of general interest in rural areas – What Germany can learn from the experience of other European countries" (InDaLE), we analysed factors and conditions which enable the **mainstreaming of pilot projects** in Germany and abroad.

At the Thünen Institute we focused our research on **fire and hazard prevention services**. This includes fire protection and prevention, civil protection, and technical relief. In Germany and other European countries, the former has been a statutory duty placed on local government for decades and has entailed a clear division of responsibilities: volunteer fire brigades respond to incidents pro bono, while local authorities provide the required appliances and ancillary infrastructure. Nonetheless, this alleged self-evident symbiosis has long since been dissolved especially in rural communities which experience population decline, ageing and feature structurally weak economies. A paradox hence emerges: a declining number of volunteer firefighters (in many places barely sufficient to cover required staffing levels) is tasked with responding to a changing incident structure which is primarily driven by ever more frequent extreme weather phenomena (Figure 1). New solutions to these problems have been sought after and trialled in many places.

Approach

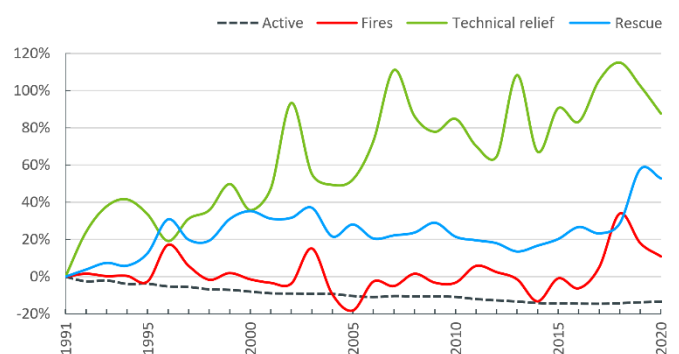
Using an **explorative approach** based on 26 semi-structured interviews and an in-depth study of five pilot projects in Germany, Austria and Scotland, we identified challenges and solutions for safeguarding fire and technical relief services in different institutional settings.

Results

We have identified the following **challenges** concerning the safeguarding of fire and technical relief services in Germany:

- the number of volunteer firefighters has been declining, whereas the number of incidents has been rising;
- daytime availability cannot be guaranteed, especially in municipalities with weak economic structures;
- many local governments face difficulties in financing equipment purchases and upgrades;
- appliances and interventions are becoming increasingly complex;
- to an ever greater degree, volunteer engagement is becoming bound to short-term projects, whereas volunteer fire brigades require a long-term commitment.

Figure 1: Change in the number of interventions and the number of active volunteer firefighters in Germany 1991–2020 (compared to 1991)



Source: Authors' illustration based on the annual statistics of the German Fire Services Association (1993-2022)

Many of the trialled or touted **measures and strategies for future-proofing** volunteer firefighting (Table 1) can be understood as shifts in assuming and assigning responsibilities. Examples include the limited introduction of full-time positions,

raising of the upper age limit for active membership, initiating inter-municipal or intra-regional cooperation, or focusing on fire safety education to improve people’s self-protection capacities. In this changing and expanding landscape, private organisations, citizens, and the state take on new roles in delivering fire and hazard prevention services. This partial **redistribution of traditional responsibilities** can be described as an incipient paradigm shift, the scope and possible long-term effects of which have not yet been fully addressed in practice or in research.

Table 1: Overarching solutions of the analysed pilot projects

	Fire safety education	Supra-local cooperation	Social awareness of fire brigades and volunteering
Researched pilot projects	Gemeinsam. Sicher. Feuerwehr [Together. Safe. Firefighters] (Upper Austria), Mehr Feuerwehr in die Schule [More Firefighters in Schools] (Hesse), Fire Reach / Fire Skills (Scotland)	Aufbau interkommunaler Managementstrukturen im Brand- und Katastrophenschutz in der Oderlandregion [Development of inter-municipal management structures for fire and hazard prevention in the Oderland region] (Brandenburg)	Haus der Feuerwehr und Vereine Maishofen [House of the Fire Brigade and Associations] (Land Salzburg)
Main actors	Local fire brigades, educational establishments	Local fire brigades, fire and hazard prevention authorities	Local authorities, citizens, businesses
Typical range of duties	Training on handling hazards, recruitment	Maintenance and procurement of appliances, training	Maintaining an adequate staffing and financing of fire brigades
Key challenge	Inconsistent implementation	Time-consuming supplementary tasks	Volunteering in fire brigades often barely noted
Aims of new approaches	Improving the self-protection capacities of the population, recruitment	Establishing supra-local structures	Safeguarding operational capacities and daytime availability
Focus of new approaches	New cooperation between education system and emergency response organisations	New forms of coordination, establishment of full-time positions	New spatial and social interactions

Source: authors’ elaboration.

Recommendations

To safeguard and future-proof fire and technical relief services in rural areas, we recommend:

- (1) ... to establish full-time regional positions for coordinative, administrative and routine tasks with the aim of relieving the burden on volunteers in local fire brigades.**

Regions experiencing population decline and ageing are likely to face a shortage of active firefighters, especially qualified officers. The establishment of a full-time coordination unit at a supra local level (e.g., county) would enable volunteers to focus on fire service-related tasks in the narrower sense. Training, equipment maintenance, and procurement could be carried out more efficiently, but also a continuous exchange between the local fire brigades about current problems and possible solutions could be established.

- (2) ... to improve the self-protection capacities of the population of all age groups in cooperation with all organisations and authorities responsible for hazard prevention.**

For volunteer firefighters, fire safety education (for children, teenagers and adults alike) is one of the many tasks belonging to everyday work. In rural areas, this is mainly carried out on an individual basis by committed volunteers. Given this unsystematic approach, the outcome strongly depends on the personal preferences and didactic skills of the volunteers involved. Structuring the delivery and contents of fire safety education pivots on the multilevel cooperation between fire and hazard prevention services on the one hand, and actors belonging to the education system on the other. In order to improve the population’s resilience and ability to protect themselves, fire safety education should not be restricted to children and teenagers but also needs to be further developed for adults.

- (3) ... that the state fire brigade associations (Landesfeuerwehrverbände) take on a more active public role in representing the interests of volunteer fire brigades.**

The state fire brigade associations could take on if not a leading, then at least a more active role in formulating and coordinating strategies aimed to future-proof volunteer fire brigades. The implementation of such strategies must not force top-down solutions and should only take place in constant consultation with the local fire brigades. At the same time, the state fire brigade associations, as interest groups, should repeatedly and more strongly than before sensitise politicians, the media, and the public to the challenges of volunteering in emergency response and the problems of futureproofing the volunteer fire brigade model in Germany.

Further information

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Publications

Brad A, Adam Hernández A, Steinführer A (2023) Neuverteilung von Verantwortung? Brandschutzerziehung als Strategie zur Zukunftssicherung Freiwilliger Feuerwehren. *Raumforschung und Raumordnung* 81, 17 pp. | **Steinführer A, Brad A** (2022) Freiwillige Feuerwehren. In: Neu C (Ed): *Handbuch Daseinsvorsorge. Ein Überblick aus Forschung und Praxis*. Berlin, 130-141. | **Brad A, Adam Hernández A, Steinführer A** (2022) Governance der Daseinsvorsorge. In: Franz Y, Heintel M (Eds): *Kooperative Stadt- und Regionalentwicklung*. Vienna, 110-127.

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