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EGOS Paper for Sub-theme 10:
Shaping Desirable Futures – Imagining (Real) Utopias

Imagining real utopias. An empirical exploration of organizing urban and rural projects for the good life

Theoretical points of departure and research questions

This research paper explores causes and consequences of real utopias in North Germany; the study is a step towards a planned international comparison of real utopias in different national settings. We look at causes for the realization of alternative life realizations on macro, meso and micro levels. Second, we review the applicability of a three category system from desirable via viable towards achievable goals towards real utopias. Third, we compare differences and similarities of real utopias in urban and rural settings, using a spatial perspective on real utopias. Fourth, we survey how much the surveyed real utopias understand their alternative blueprints as an effective part of a broader socio-political transformation, which might happen as a ruptural, an interstitial or a symbiotic conversion of society. The point of departure for these questions is Erik Olin Wright's longstanding emancipatory social science project on real utopias, culminating in his 2010 book on "envisioning real utopias". During our empirical research, we also reference other earlier and more recent works and acquire new insights beyond existing findings.

The primary basis for our analysis are statements of interviewed members of 14 real utopia projects in North Germany, deductively and inductively analyzed by systematic contents analysis. Apart from the research constructs specified by Wright (2010), this study has gathered data on personal experiences, views of their utopian organizations, and opinions about the societal causes and impacts of their real utopias. In addition, while cities are well-studied areas of utopias, the potentials of the structurally weak countryside are less explored. For instance, in the light of a "new

rurality” (Hahne 2011) that provides interstitial niches for “pioneers of change”, our empirical review finds insights into the differences of organizing real utopias in urban and rural contexts. The urban-rural comparison is one point of departure for the future territorial (national) comparison.

Theoretical foundations

Scientific interest in the subject of utopia has grown worldwide in the last years, due to the pessimistic premonitions in view of the multiple global crises. Following the publication of American sociologist Erik Olin Wright's opus magnum on "Envisioning Real Utopias" (2010), there has been a wave of current studies that turn their attention to the possibilities of realizing utopian visions amid an often pessimistic atmosphere (e.g. Archer 2019). Especially in the wake of two world wars, social theorists such as Ernst Bloch (1986 [1938-1957], 2018 [1918]) and Karl Mannheim (2013 [1929]) have set a firm foundation about the concept of utopia that goes beyond the classic text of Thomas More (1967 [1516]). We build on this sociological and philosophical knowledge and continue with current organizational, political, sustainability and socio-psychological texts on the topic. Starting from the idea that eminent global crises prompt different manifestations of real utopias (Gümüşay & Reinecke 2022), we look at motives of creating real utopias, especially the intention to pursue a broader socio-political transformation (Harnesk & Isgren 2021). The macro-level reasoning for the urgency of a greater societal transformation is a cornerstone for the legitimacy of creating and expanding real utopian projects; however, the personal perspective and collective organizational purposes should not be neglected as motives for creating real utopias. Issues of legitimation on all three micro, meso and macro levels are at the forefront of the studied real utopias. The personal micro-perspective came forward in the interviews (“why am I doing this often tedious exertion?”), as did the meso-perspective of justifying the creation and maintenance of organizational structures. Macro-societal reasoning is mostly used as an affirmative argument to the outside; this argument seems to be more of a secondary abstract and theoretical nature compared to the experienced everyday routine of realizing utopias. In the recent public discourse about utopias, the mentioning of intertwined crises and conflicts, from climate crisis to the pandemic to armed conflict (Ulrich 2022, Haley, Paucar-Caceres & Schlindwein 2021, Baldwin & English 2020) might be thus often overstated as reason for the construction and

especially stabilization of real utopian projects. However, we have also studied the significance of this entanglement as background (necessary and/or sufficient) reason for the real utopian projects.

Current research emphasizes a turn away from the path-dependent and traditional legacy of established organizations by openly revolting, vigorously reforming or carefully remodeling existing manners of organizing our lives in late modernity through critical alternatives (Chertkovskaya 2022). Alternative organizations might express their ends as a means for macro-social transformations, by developing prefigurative and exemplary alternatives. The variety of organizing utopian collectives reflects societal imaginaries and values, linking the meso level of organizations with the macro level of striving towards a major socio-political transformation (Reinecke 2018). In their everyday work, however, real utopias do not legitimized themselves by crises and their need to bring forward a societal transformation. Instead, they are laboratories for experimenting with narrower, viable alternative futures. They practice self-organization with horizontal hierarchies and consensus-based decision-making as well as reciprocal and solidarity-based relationships in communal spaces, giving examples for how to drive systemic macro-level change and promote civil empowerment within their sphere of influence.

For formulating our research questions, we classify real utopias along four dimensions, “causes and consequences”, “urban and rural”, “visionary desires and daily grind”, and “structure and agency”. The first focuses on a self-assessed efficacy of initializing and fostering socio-political changes as ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic societal transformations (Wright 2010). The aim behind these changes is to “reduce harm” by taming and halting a problematic development on the grand level of, i.e., the whole of society, and on the specific level of creating reliance and robustness for the micro and meso levels of utopian participants and organizations. (Chertkovskaya 2022). Earlier discourses emphasize the demand for macro-societal changes but later discourses include also organizational meso and individual micro levels (especially in view of the totalitarian systems of the 20th century). Thomas More wrote about the societal structures of a utopia. However, already Ernst Bloch (1986) described the pathway towards concrete utopia as a collective meso endeavor of organizing the future, and Karl Mannheim (1929) contrasted the entrenched social

orders of the early 20th century, which were determined by ideologies, with an individual utopian consciousness, which wishes to change the dominant encrusted social order. The “primacy of the individual” (Thompson 2012: 38ff.) is seen as a counterbalance to an excessive overemphasis of the societal. Relational sociology states that the networking of the individual into organizational endeavors produces institutional societal structures of utopian alternatives, and therefore, all three levels are studied together. This multi-perspective study has been applied in an examination of urban real utopias as “spaces of possibilities” (Kagan, Kirchberg & Weisenfeld 2019; Kagan & Kirchberg 2022).

Most current studies are on utopias (Amin 2006) or dystopias (MacLeod & Ward 2002) in urban settings; the corresponding potentials and hindrances of the countryside are less explored. Rural areas are nowadays often structurally weak areas, confronted by an ambivalent crisis-situation due to population decline, low economic development opportunities, lack of jobs and geographical remoteness. At the same time, they show a higher intensity of social relationships than urban areas (Henkel 2004) and offer interstitial niches as possible spaces for “pioneers of transformation” (WGBu-2011: 6). In the light of this “new rurality”, the lack of comparisons between urban and rural areas regarding the development of real utopias is a research gap. On the macro-level, our research aims at an urban-rural comparison of organizing real utopias in view of the power-balancing triangle of state, market and civil society.

Research Questions

Derived from these thoughts, the following research questions are guiding the study.

- What are similarities and differences of organizing real utopias in urban and rural areas?
- How does utopian thinking distinguish among desirable, feasible and achievable futures?
- What are the causes of real utopias? Particularly, how much do the current global crises affect the growth of real utopias? How do initiators and sustainers of real utopias define their contribution to transforming society?
- What are the consequences of real utopias? Particularly, how much do the initiators and sustainers of real utopias believe in their efficacy?

- How much do initiators and sustainers of real utopias feel limited or controlled by social constraints (structure); how much do they have a self-conception of their ability to change “the world” (agency)?

We thus assume four major dimensions with the following poles:

1. Urban versus rural settings
2. Desirable and visionary ideas versus viable and implementable ideas
3. Individual, organizational and societal reasoning
4. Structure versus agency

Empirical procedures

Method

The empirical method applied here is qualitative guideline-based expert interviewing (Longhurst 2003). Qualitative data was collected in the existing field of real utopias in North Germany. We interviewed leading project participants of real utopian organizations and networks. These interviewees answered as individuals – from their personal point of view and as representatives of their real utopia – from their organizational and their societal perspectives. Thus, they were interviewed as experts of society and socio-political transformation.

Data analysis has been conducted by systematic content analysis (Gläser & Laudel 2010), exploring thematic categories and codes of the interviews. Coding was processed with the help of the CAQDAS program Atlas.ti. The systematic content analysis was divided in (1) finding concise descriptive codes, (2) categorizing codes by construct-corresponding terms and inductive emerging themes and (3) correlating categorical concepts. A document-code-analysis as well as a code-occurrence-analysis was conducted.

Operationalization

We asked about concrete experiences, reasons to fulfil real utopias, ideas about effects and efficacy, and assessment of the real utopias' work as micro-steps (individuals), meso-steps (organizations), and macro-steps (societal change). Micro-, meso- and macro-perspectives are alternating in the interviews. These three perspectives are ideal-typical categories, which often overlap and cannot always be clearly distinguished. The operationalization of Wright's (2010) theoretical concepts

on the intensity of real utopian activities and the range of expected societal transformative power, differences between urban and rural settings, and additional questions about micro-level motives (biographical and individual), meso-level rewards (organizational and collective), and macro-level aspirations (political visions) are the main constructs structuring the interviews. These constructs have been translated into the following observable, measurable and queriable issues, as guideline of all qualitative semi-structured interviews (table 1).

Table 1: Interview Guideline: Main theoretical constructs and translation into questions

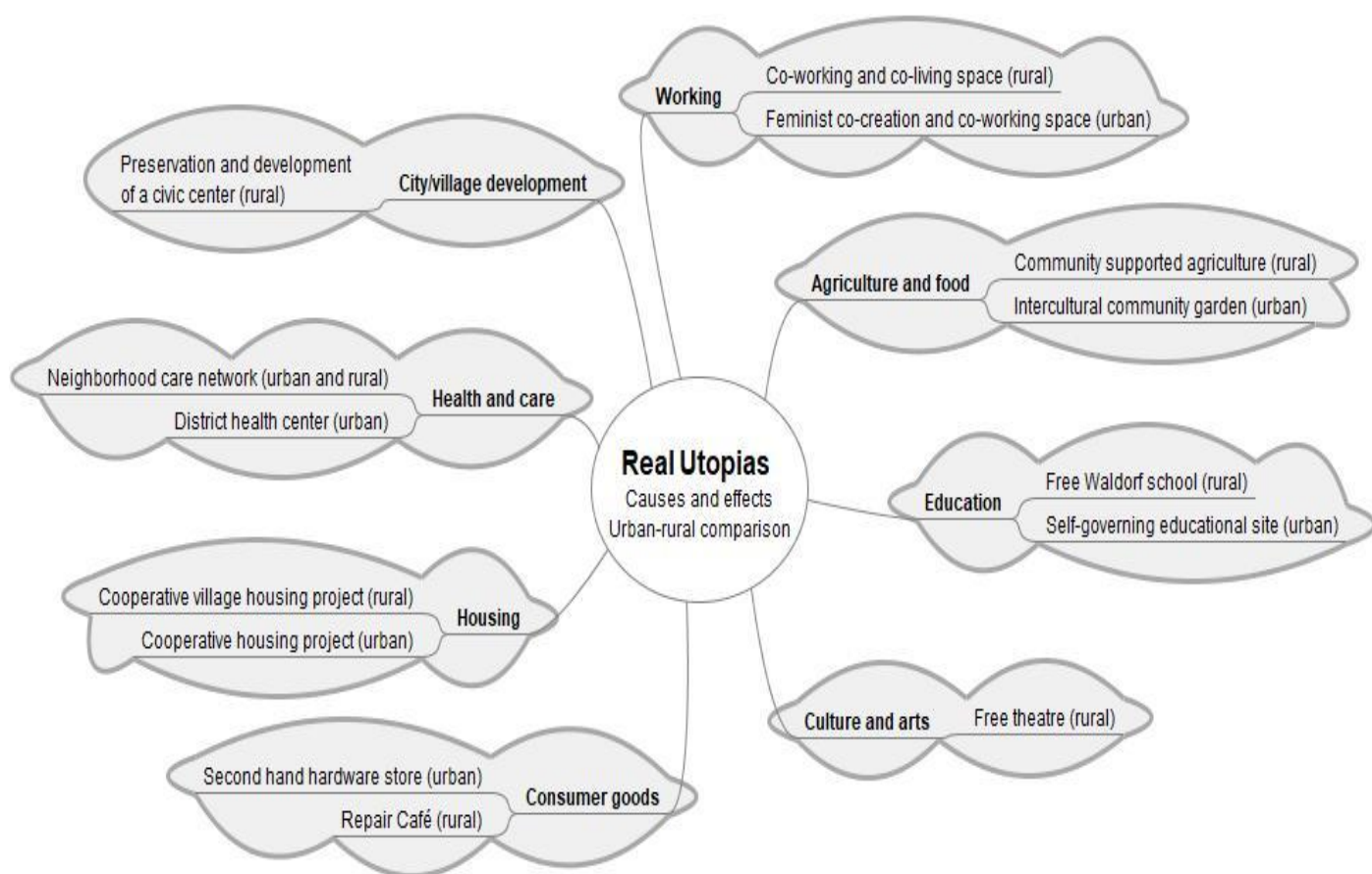
Dimension (theoretical frame)	Sub-dimension (theoretical construct)	Operationalization (questions in semi-structured interview guideline)
Distinguishing and connecting macro, meso and micro perspectives on real utopias	Temporality: Micro-versus macro-vision for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your societal visions of the future? • What are your personal visions of the future?
	Temporality: Initial biographical causes for real utopian activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you come to initiate or join the organization?
	Temporality: Current biographical incentives for real utopian activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your current position in life? • Does this position in life have an influence on your participation in the organization? • Concerning visions for the future, what do you perceive among your fellow participants of the organization? • Are there differences regarding age, generational belonging, family situation, or other personal traits?
	Organizing real utopias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How formalized is your organization? • Can anyone participate in your organization? If not, why not? • Are you or your organization part of a larger network?
Range of utopian thinking: degree of visionary desirability	Desirability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you dream of for your organization, if everything were possible? • Do you have common wishes for your organization? • What would you, as a group, dream of for your organization, if everything were possible? • Have your common dreams changed over time?
Range of utopian thinking: degree of implementable achievability	Viability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which personal or common wishes for your organization do you consider viable, if the conditions were better than they are?
	Achievability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did you have to make a compromise regarding the realization of your personal dreams for your organization? What kind of limitations did you experience as an individual? • When did you have to make a compromise regarding the realization of your common dreams for your organization? What kind of limitations did you experience as a group?
Consciousness of a real utopia	Understanding of real utopia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the practices of your organization the realization of a real utopia?
Urban versus rural perspective	Urban-rural comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you choose this place? • How does the spatial location affect the development of your organization? • Are the practices of your organization limited to urban/rural areas? Why (not)?

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do your visions for this organization intend an outreach to other areas?
Real utopias in societal power balance	Power-balancing triangle of state, market and civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the roles of state, market and civil society for societal change from your perspective? Which governmental conditions would be beneficial for the dissemination of your practices?
Efficacy of socio-political transformation by real utopia	Ruptural, interstitial or symbiotic assessment of socio-political transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your understanding of societal change? What is the project's potential for societal change? What role does your activity in this project play for societal change?
	Real utopias as laboratories for societal transformation (micro-, meso- and macro-level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did you experience moments of failure in your organization? How do you personally deal with moments of failure in your organization? How do you as a group deal with moments of failure in your organization? Does failure have an influence on your personal and common utopia? If yes, what kind of influence?
Additional consequences of real utopia activities	Effects on personal micro-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your activity for the organization affect you personally?
	Effects on organizational meso-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does your activity affect your immediate surroundings?
	Effects on societal macro-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What effect does your organization have on society as a whole? How do you consider the intended and the real impact of your organization?

Sampling

We have selected 14 real utopia projects in North Germany for this exploration. The interview partners represent seven urban and seven rural real utopias. For eight interviews, two - and in one case three - interview partners participated. Among the 23 interview partners, twelve were male and nine female, ranging from an age from the midst 30s to the midst 60s. The organizations and networks were selected based on theoretical sampling. Selection categories were the organization's intentions of contributing to the empowerment of civil society and to solving societal problems as well as the aim of showing alternatives to the capitalist economic and societal system. Furthermore, as a spatial selection criterion, organizations were selected that are based in cities or villages in Lower-Saxony, Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein. Eight exemplary life areas were selected, as these cover a broad diversity of real utopias (housing, working, agriculture & food, education, care work, consumer goods, arts and culture, urban and village development). For almost each area of life, one urban and one rural organization was selected. Thus, these cases illustrate characteristics of many specific life areas in city or countryside (figure 1).

Figure 1: Overview of interviewed real utopias



Co-housing, co-working spaces, alternative schools, agricultural sites as well as organizations dealing with consumer goods could equally be found in the city and the countryside. However, for the care work area, an equivalent organization to the medical polyclinic in big cities could not be found in the structurally weak rural areas in Northern Germany. Instead, an international neighborhood care network also based in North Germany, with a formerly rural focus was selected. Regarding the life areas of “urban and rural development”, and “arts and culture”, only rural organizations could be interviewed within the scope of this exploratory study.

Results

Urban-rural comparison of real utopias

Several similarities of organizing real utopias in urban and rural areas could be found. The grand challenges of global crises affect real utopias both in rural and urban areas. Both urban and rural real utopias name their aim of promoting social life and connecting different groups of people. “Networking” is the second most frequently mentioned code, which is addressed by all organizations (see table 2). Due to

digitalization, communication is largely equally possible in rural and urban areas; thus, communication was not mentioned as a challenge of rural real utopias. In both, urban and rural real utopias, clichés about specific groups of people (e.g. “the rural population” or “the population of a social hot spot”) are criticized (quotations by *u-agricult* real utopias and *r-culture* real utopias).¹ In both urban and rural real utopias, participants report high levels of solidarity with refugees.

Table 2: Number of codes mentioned in urban and rural real utopias

Code (code group)	Total number	Urban real utopias	Rural real utopias
Financial situation (<i>challenges</i>)	124	77	47
Networking (<i>networking</i>)	105	49	56
Micro-level causes of participation (<i>causes</i>)	99	29	70
Group description (<i>organization</i>)	87	56	31
Desirability (<i>visionary degree</i>)	87	43	44
Communication within the organization (<i>organization</i>)	80	54	26
Generation and age (<i>challenges</i>)	78	32	46
Contacts to the neighborhood (<i>networking</i>)	74	32	42
Bearing responsibility (<i>agency</i>)	65	25	40
Bureaucracy as an obstacle (<i>macro-level challenges</i>)	58	27	31
Personnel situation (<i>challenges</i>)	53	30	23
Formal organization (<i>organization</i>)	49	31	18
Individual handling of societal crises (<i>causes; crises</i>)	36	5	31
Hope (<i>agency</i>)	33	6	27
Work overload (<i>challenges</i>)	20	13	7
Relation of market, state, civil society (<i>power balance</i>)	18	12	6
Transformation by interstitial niches (<i>transformation strategies by Wright</i>)	17	14	3
Dealing with critics (<i>networking</i>)	16	5	11
Criticism of profit maximization (<i>challenges</i>)	16	15	1
Transformation by disruption (<i>transformation strategies by Wright</i>)	15	8	7
Transformation by symbiosis (<i>transformation strategies by Wright</i>)	12	2	10
War (<i>challenges, crises</i>)	11	2	9
Climate crisis (<i>challenges, crises</i>)	11	3	8
Crises as a primary driver for action (<i>causes, crises</i>)	11	4	7
Resilience (<i>agency</i>)	9	0	9

¹ Quotations are indicated as follows: r= rural, u= urban, u/r = urban and rural, agricult= agriculture & food, consume = consumer goods, educ = education, develop = development, house = housing, care = care, nursing, health, work = (co-) working spaces

Many specific differences of organizing urban or rural real utopias could be found, too. While real utopias in urban areas are usually well connected to public transport, rural real utopias are often remotely located and thus struggle with transport issues (*u/r-care, r-culture*). Moreover, participants of rural real utopias experience more sense of community, more willingness to support each other and therefore more sense of security in rural areas than in cities (e.g. *r-consume*). The coordinator of a neighborhood care network (*r-care*) states that it was easier to build groups for neighborhood help in rural than in urban areas and refers to existing supportive church and family structures in rural areas. The inclusion of existing local economy cooperatives in the project development was mentioned in rural real utopias (*r-develop, r-consume*), not in urban real utopias. This tendency of inclusion can be found also by three rural real utopias (*r-work, r-develop, r-care*) that highlight their strategy to work together with many different actors and representatives of all political parties. In light of a low population density, rural utopias experience less a determination of exclusivity and thinking in categories of “We” and “Them”.

At the same time, there are often less community meeting places and less diversity of cultural opportunities in rural areas (*u-agricult, r-work*). Similarly, participants of real utopias report that they find it more difficult to mobilize groups for their interests in rural than in urban areas (*r-consume, u-care, u-agricult*). Moreover, two rural real utopias address their strong rejection and demarcation from right-wing projects found in remote rural areas. This challenge is not mentioned in urban real utopias. Here, on the other hand, two urban real utopias deal with urban poverty and name the aim of improving the living conditions in a social hot spot strengthening social cohesion and destigmatizing neighborhoods (*u-agricult, u-care*). Poverty issues are not mentioned in rural real utopias.

Rural real utopias point out that they have many opportunities for development since they have a lot of space (e.g. for work-shops, vegetable gardens or glasshouses) (*r-educ, r-culture*). Urban participants of real utopias, on the other hand, report that they lack space and that it has become increasingly difficult for small initiatives to find locations, due to the increase of land and construction prices and rental increases (*u-house*). Several urban real utopias are threatened by gentrification, and they understand themselves as a “bulwark” against it (*u-house: 151*²), with low rents in

² Number indicates line in interview text when quoted verbatim.

gentrified areas or as an intentional “eyesore” (*u-consume*: 111) in the eyes of potential investors. Correspondingly, the dire financial situation of real utopias is addressed more often in urban real utopias than in rural real utopias (see table 2). Participants of urban real utopias complain about their organizational and financial difficulties to rent machines or material and refer to the better direct neighborhood help in rural areas (*u-agricult*, *u-educ*). On the other hand, they refer to the missing institutionalization of structures in rural areas (*u-agricult*). “A shed full of great stuff” (*u-consume*: 138) is enviously described as a widespread phenomenon in rural areas, but such a networked system of local mutual assistance is not institutionalized in the urban context:

“an institutional framework would support that. Then you could build partnerships. If someone confesses, here, I also have a shed full of great stuff. If I knew that, you could also network” (*u-consume*: 138).

As urban areas have usually less space for specific needs (e.g. repair shops) in private spaces, the urban real utopias point out the need for institutionalized communal structures as a network substitute (*u-educ*). Corresponding to a stronger formal institutionalization, urban real utopias pay more attention to processes of communication within their organization, outward directed descriptions of their organizations and other aspects of formal organization more frequently than rural real utopias (see table 2). On the other hand, rural real utopias stress neighborly contacts and informal individual reasons for participation more than urban real utopias.

As rural real utopias often refer to the rural advantage of having more space, they also justify their choice of rural living by the opportunities to co-form living, residing and working as a unit (*r-agricult*, *r-culture*). This is not mentioned by urban real utopias. Rural real utopias also highlight the advantage of contemplative living, seeing the countryside as a “resting point” (*r-work*: 128). The urban context is regarded as stressful because of the permanent fight against outside social constraints. Rural lifestyles are thus described as healthier than urban living, due to better air quality, lower radiation exposure and living in connection with nature (*r-agricult*, *r-educ*, *r-work*, *r-house*). At the same time, the renunciation of urban infrastructure is described as “detoxification” (*r-educ*: 242).

The interviewed urban and rural real utopias have contrary opinions about opportunities of political participation. While urban housing projects explicitly chose to live in the city due to their perception of having more opportunities to participate and

influence political life, rural real utopias report greater opportunities for networking and participating in their vicinity, like easier participating in the local council (*r-culture*). There is various mentioning of a higher sense of community in rural than in urban real utopias. No rural real utopias alludes to social isolation as a problem. Thus, urban ideas of life in the countryside do not match to the reports of living conditions by the rural population itself.

Range of utopian thinking

Desirability

When asked about their wishes for realizing their utopia, rural real utopias answer that they are already doing what they want and feel satisfied with the accomplished state (*r-educ, r-culture*). They form their lives as a unit of residing, working and living at the same place. Apart from one statement, none of the urban real utopias calls the state of their real utopias close to their initial goals. A large share of desirable goals has the idea of “growth”. Several urban and rural real utopias wish their real utopia to grow, and they are very specific about the nature of growth. For instance, a community supported agriculture initiative aims at seven hectares of land and a full supply of vegetable food products for more members, and a rural schooling project aims at a twelve-year curriculum, plus a vocational college. In addition, many urban and rural real utopias wish to be better known to the outside, and spread their message not only in their sector but also beyond (*u/r-care, u-consume*). Apart from these desires, most statements of the interviewees are rarely visionary – if one does not interpret the getting rid of structural (outside institutional) constraints as such a desire.

Viability

Most urban and rural real utopias are optimistic regarding viability, declaring that, under favorable conditions, anything is viable. Possible is “*everything; we just have to want it*” (*u-care: 60*). On a macro-level, rural real utopias state that under favorable societal conditions, they would work more sustainable, asking for structural funding instead for project funding, and for locally developed organizational structures (*r-educ, r-culture*). Under more supportive financial and legal conditions, they would more cooperate and look for solutions with governmental offices instead of being hindered by regulations (*r-work*). One urban real utopia calls for an unconditional

basic income in order to improve its staff situation, since many people would like to be engaged in the real utopia, but cannot afford it (*u-consume*). Both, urban and rural real utopias state that especially a legal ownership of land and house ownership could secure their long-term existence. Existential fears regarding the long-term security of the property due to an external ownership and in view of the development real estate market development are mentioned by urban real utopias (*r-develop, u-educ*). Correspondingly, urban participants generally refer more to the need of balancing powers among state, market and civil society (see table 2).

Achievability

First, it is striking that achievability is most often mentioned in combination with topics such as “dire financial situation” followed by “bureaucracy as obstacle” and “personnel situation”. On a macro-level, most urban and rural real utopias report that bureaucratic hindrances are the major limitations of any project development. For instance, obstructive bureaucratic regulations are building permissions (e.g. for a new construction container and for a tiny house), income regulations (e.g. for unemployed or the complicated proof of need for social projects) (*u-consume, r-work, r-consume, u-educ*). For both urban and rural real utopias, achievability is dependent on the improvement of financial means, which is the most frequent topic of all real utopias. Although rural and urban real utopias call for such a secure financing, they do not want outside financial resources as a controlling means as it might inhibit creativity (*r-educ, r-agricult*). The combination of financing needs and bureaucratic hurdles amplifies the negative. They do not get no or only very little funding from public agencies but applying for small projects is time-consuming, changing the quality and quantity of real utopian work, “sometimes my main job is being an accountant” (*r-culture: 302*). The bureaucratic workload hinders, e.g. artistic work, and changing these circumstances to an easier process is considered little promising (*r-culture*). Along with better financial resources and less bureaucracy, urban and rural real utopias want a better work and living situation for their staff, which is oftentimes operating at and beyond a power limit. The barrier of being overworked has to be torn down, “the next step would simply be that we can live okay” (*u-work: 69*). Several real utopias state that they cannot pay their staff adequately and that, due to that, they have to reduce their outside offers (*u-agricult, u-care*). More financial resources for setting up jobs is a pivotal step for achieving especially personal relief of the people realizing their utopias. Furthermore, both urban and rural real utopias wish to

promote exchange and networking with more groups and generations that have the same goals as they have but due to limited resources, they have difficulties reaching out to these target groups (*u/r-care*). On the micro-level, a limit towards achievability, especially in rural real utopias, is the age of participants. The aim of distributing tasks and responsibility to younger project participants is often described as challenging (*r-agricult, r-culture, r-house*), which corresponds to the topics “generation and age” and “bearing responsibility”. Urban and rural real utopias state that project development take much longer than expected at the beginning, and personal euphoria thus decreases over time (*r-house*). Therefore, many real utopias set themselves low aims at the beginning, and practice the “art of small steps” (*u-consume*: 131) in order to prevent frustration (*u-consume, r-consume, u-educ*).

“So, if I want to change something, then I can only change something that I have a concrete influence on. I can only realize utopia by working through one step at a time” (u-consume: 147).

Several representatives state that they consciously do not set themselves high aims and try to remain realistic:

“Perhaps we have always chosen our goals so wisely that they are achievable. Well, we do not want to reach for the stars. We think beforehand. What can we do? Of course, we woolgather, too. But with a fair amount of realism. We have never set such high goals that you could really fail” (u-educ: 141).

Causes of organizing real utopias

What are the causes of real utopias? Answering this question, we distinguish micro and macro levels when analyzing the causes’ shape and scope; the meso level as been included in the macro level. The stated causes on the societal macro level are not only rarely in contradiction to the stated causes on the personal micro level.

Macro-level causes

Macro-level causes for organizing real utopias are justified by ideas of socio-political transformation expressed by the interview partners. We have information about contents of a desired societal change, and about three forms of a desired societal change, from radical change (revolution) to a peaceful and smooth change in cooperation with the current political powers (symbiosis).

Ideas of socio-political transformation

Ideas about desired societal system changes are diverse and range from proponents of a social market economy (*u-consume*) to anarchist turnovers (*u-educ*) to scathing criticism of capitalism (*u-care*). The interviewed real utopias regard transformation through political education (*r-consume*), trustful encounters (*u-work*), contacts between people from different backgrounds (leaving our “bubbles”) (*u-care*), and the expansion of grassroots decision-making (*u-care*). Focused on their life and work area, they describe the transformative function of their organization based on their specific societal sector, e.g.

- securing an improvement of care work by developing a neighborhood care network (*u/r-care*) and a district health center (*u-care*),
- not wasting construction material by running a second-hand market for construction needs (*u-consume*),
- raising awareness of the value of food by cultivating a community garden (*u-agricult*),
- bringing different communities together by running a co-working space (*u-work, r-work*),
- and ensuring affordable rents and self-organization without landlords by running a cooperative housing project (*u-house*).

Ruptural, interstitial or symbiotic assessment of socio-political transformation

Wright’s (2010) classification of ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic transformation strategies refers to the macro-level of societal change. However, many of the interviewed real utopias identify with these macro-concepts also on a personal, and on an organizational level. They justify the founding, the existence and even the daily work of their real utopias with these more abstract future wishes. Thus, although thought as macro concepts, the participants name these societal goals also as micro-level reasons for being active in a utopian project, and as meso-level reasons to engage collectively in organizing a real utopia. However, most interviewed projects refrain from radical political activities. Only two urban real utopias mention that, besides many other activities, they also participate in protests like loud and outspoken demonstrations, but none of the participants are involved in violent ruptural strategies. More to the contrary, the real utopias distance themselves from this style of disruption. Some participants name their age as a reason, and others

state that in a democratically well laid out society like Germany, revolution should not be the aim. Instead, most real utopias are in favor of an interstitial transformation strategy. Urban real utopias name the development of niches (and interstitial transformation as a rhizome-like “stealth strategy” of changing society) more often than the rural real utopias (table 2). The former describe interstitial transformation as the development of “...many islands that are increasingly merging and then bring about this transformation” (*u-work*: 55). Especially the urban housing real utopia, coming from the collective movement of the 1980s, regards the foundation of many collectives as a significant contribution to socio-political transformation (*u-house*).³ However, some real utopias do not aspire for societal change but would like to remain and maintain their independence on their local level, acting independently of major powers and politics: “My experience is that there is always a lot of talking and planning and doing and then usually nothing happens” (*r-consume*: 117). Likewise, an urban participant says: “It is better that (...) this utopia is build and created by the people and not dictated by politics” (*u-consume*: 145). In general, rural real utopians are less radical in their societal desires than urban real utopias. The former mention symbiotic transformation strategies more often than the urban real utopias (table 2). More rural real utopias regard their attitude of maintaining contacts with people from all political parties as suitable, also due to the older age of the,, and their years of strategic experience of networking as actors of civil society with representatives of the state (*r-develop*). They regard revolution as ruptural transformation event as inhibiting, counter-productive and exclusionary, and they rather strive for an inclusive cooperation with all democratically minded people (*r-culture*).

Macro-level crises as drivers for action

Besides the wish for a (peaceful) societal transformation as cause and reasoning for their real utopia, many of the surveyed interview partners name the urgent necessity to fight the many global crises as driver for their participation in real utopias. More often than urban representatives, rural representatives address this as a main individual reason for realizing and living in a real utopia (table 2). Particularly crises connected to war and to climate change are addressed more often by rural than by urban real utopias. In addition, the importance of crises as a driver for action is

³ The interstitial strategy of changing society by many interconnected real utopias is close to the concept of ‘multitude’ that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2005) have developed. According to them, multitude is a multinoded commons that combines different groups to fight the global order of ‘empire’.

sometimes a primary, sometimes a secondary or not so relevant cause. More rural than urban real utopias understand climate change as a major threat of the future and want to contribute to climate protection in their own living environment (*r-consume*). A staff member of a rural alternative school believes “that we are facing the greatest changes that have ever existed” (*r-educ*: 308) and therefore feels a strong and immediate need to prepare children by fostering their personal resilience by education. A founder of a rural theatre regards the challenges of dealing with global crises as the central topic of his work (*r-culture*). The experience of crises can be overwhelming. Therefore, the rural real utopia states that sometimes they do not want to listen to the news and that suppression sometimes seems to be a healthy strategy that promotes personal resilience (*r-culture*). This interview partner also regards living in the countryside as luxury and describes that the “vastness of the sky” (*r-culture*: 118) makes him happy: “that’s really a luxury and sometimes it just brings me to moments when I do not really care, if everyone is always talking about the biggest crises” (*r-culture*: 118). Several rural interview partners state their aim of blanking out the major global crises. When experiencing other people, who are stressed by negative news and live in a “hamster wheel” (*r-agricult*: 78), a member of a rural agricultural community decides not to follow the news at all: “I keep that away and then I can go about my everyday life quite happily” (*r-agricult*: 75). These expressions of personally keeping away global crises is more seldom in urban real utopias. Only one participant of an urban real utopia states that he is happy to stay in his niche independently of global crises: “I am absolutely happy that I can develop this place regardless of big events of war or what Corona does” (*u-consume*: 147). Although acknowledging the existence of global crises, the interviewed real utopias, rural and urban, do not regard crises only as a negative, making clear their perpetual ‘spirit of hope’, even in the face of catastrophic dawn (Bloch 1986). For instance, the founder of a rural co-working space sees climate change as a chance to help humankind developing a vision of working together and growing together as humanity (*r-work*). The founder of an urban co-working space had a positive experience in a personal crisis as she was supported and felt cared for by her group (*u-work*).

Micro-level causes

The last statement already points out the significance of personal causes to live and work in real utopias that are not connected to the above macro causes, at least not consciously. On a personal level, the interviewed participants of real utopias state that they participate because they

- were unhappy with their previous job and were looking for a better place to work (*r-agricult, r-educ, u-care*),
- experienced a persuasive moment in contact with other participants of real utopias (*r-house, r-work*),
- experience possibilities for personal development, e.g. gaining responsibility for their lives, and govern themselves more autonomously (*r-work, r-culture*),
- find it interesting and have fun being involved in creating something new (*r-develop, r-educ*),
- enjoy pursuing a meaningful life in work and human relations (*u-work*),
- are looking for a place to feel cared for and to grow old (*r-house*),
- and love their real utopia: “I love this here” (*u-educ: 11*).

Personal and societal visions of the future

The line for societal and personal reasoning for living in a real utopia is sometimes blurred. Generally, in the light of global crises, no participant questions the need for socio-political transformation but their personal involvement in fighting crises is more differentiated. They refrain from working against these global crises if they are more pessimistic about them. Pessimistic perspectives on the societal future are voiced by seven participants from rural and urban real utopias. These participants state that they rather have a dystopia in mind when thinking about the future: “How Corona worked and now aggressive wars, threatening gestures, nuclear war and so on, somehow, I rather have a dystopia in mind” (*u-consume: 77*). Here, a negative chronological development of the individual perspective is mentioned: “Question at the wrong time. In 2019, I would have been in a good mood, I would have answered in a good mood” (*u-consume: 75*). This development of pessimistic perspectives is justified by current crises like the Ukraine war, climate change and the Corona pandemic as well as a perceived declining societal solidarity, growing individualization and financial austerity (*r-work, u-agricult*).

Optimistic perspectives, on the other hand, also trigger a personal involvement in living “against crises”. They are mentioned by ten participants of both urban and rural real utopias. Hopeful expressions of a brighter future are made more frequently in rural than in urban real utopias (table 2). Rural participants state that they want to concentrate on their own agency (*r-educ*, *r-agricult*) and positive developments like growing networks due to the internet (*r-work*) instead of being inhibited by fear and negative news (*r-work*, *r-agricult*). Fostering resilience is mentioned only by rural, not by urban real utopias. For instance, a rural participant regards his optimism as a precondition for his own activities:

“If I were pessimistic (...), life would no longer be fun. Well, I think, [Name] and I, we rather have hope for the future and that’s why we are committed to it” (r-consume: 27).

An urban participant expresses pessimism on the societal macro-level and optimism on the personal micro-level: “If you look at all this, it looks pretty bleak. But when I look at the reality of my life, I have hope” (*u-educ*: 41). Similarly ambivalent, another urban participant of a real utopia states that he sees huge problems arising and regards his real utopia as “a very small piece of a puzzle (...), which can hopefully contribute to it” (*u-care*: 72). Three participants of urban and rural real utopias take hope from a perceived growing societal consciousness for global crises such as climate change and a growing willingness to act for a socio-political transformation (*u-agricult*, *r-educ*, *u-care*).

Consequences of organizing real utopias

After asking for the causes participating in a real utopia, we surveyed the assessed consequences of real utopias. This was more difficult to answer, and thus the statements remain vaguer.

Micro-level personal consequences

For several urban and rural interview partners, the real utopia has a great value for their personal life in general: “I live my dream here” (*u-educ*: 143) and “I really think it is a great gift to be able to live such a life” (*r-culture*: 284). Due to the networking of the projects, real utopias have the positive micro-level effect of developing individual hope and “courage in a world that is somehow also very shaky” (*u-work*: 95).

Participant’s acting is also described as hedonistic (“it is fun”, *r-develop*: 227). They

experience self-efficacy (*r-educ*), satisfaction of making a difference (*r-develop*) and a strong self-confidence for standing up for others (*r-consume*). In two housing projects and the feminist co-working space, participants report about their feeling of being cared for and their experience of a strong willingness to help each other. Moreover, participants experience personal development as they learn a lot every day about themselves and about practical and bureaucratic tasks (*r-educ, r-work, u-house*). At the same time, real utopias talk about negative micro-level consequences. A major negative effect is the personal overload and the feeling of permanently working beyond the power limit (e.g. *u-work, r-educ*). In addition, separating the real utopia from private life is regarded as challenging (*u-agricult, u-care, r-culture*) and the founder of the feminist co-working space states that experiencing self-exploitation at a feminist place is painful and “personally very challenging because we work parallel to make this possible“ (*u-work: 21*). The founder experiences meaningful work and meaningful relationships, but the real utopia is “far from providing us with a livelihood, which at best it should, so that we no longer manage this balancing act, especially since we all have children” (*u-work: 21*). The group members of this real utopia wish “that we are not always on our last legs” (*u-work: 55*). Similarly, a member of an urban district health care center states that in his real utopia, the prevalent big dreams and the huge overworking contradict themselves.

“I think that's the other big point, that we (...) have a project that has big dreams, that somehow wants to change a lot, where we are still a long way from where we actually all want to go. At the same time, there are people who work here who are pretty exhausted from their work and don't get much more work done” (u-care: 36).

Several representatives of real utopias also name the potential of their real utopia for organizational development as an effect. Especially organizations working with grassroots decision-making governance mention their growing experience and knowledge of functionalities of codetermination, improvements of efficiency and successful experiences of efficacy (*r-educ, u-educ*).

Macro-level consequences

Most interview partners express a desire to contribute to socio-political transformation (*r-consume, r-culture*). At the same time, they have trouble answering the more abstract because political question of macro-level consequences; they can only anticipate in a speculative way, and not know for sure about their positive macro-level

societal consequences of their engagement.⁴ At least it can be stated that all real utopias experience positive consequences of their existence in their direct environment. Interview partners report about positive feedback from local residents, politicians, parents, users and audiences (*r-develop*, *r-educ*, *u-educ*, *r-culture*). For example, an urban housing project successfully hands over its knowledge to the formation of other new housing projects (*u-house*), an urban co-working space links people who would otherwise not be in contact (*u-work*), and an urban district health care center inspires local residents to contribute to community district work (*u-care*). However, some real utopias also cause ambivalent consequences. Particularly, rural real utopias talk about individual opponents from the neighborhood (*r-work*, *r-educ*, *r-culture*) and difficulties to involve local residents (*r-house*). In addition, structural constraints limit the macro-level effects of real utopias. Due to a lack of political regulations, the urban real utopia for the reuse of construction material is only effective on a cultural and educational level, but not on the wanted material level (*u-consume*). A real utopia in an urban social hot spot cannot strive for macro-level effects, e.g. via participation in demonstrations, because local residents are afraid of repression (*u-agricult*).

Real utopias' efficacy of socio-political transformation

Real utopias always regard their specific approach to their societal sector as promising for socio-political transformation because this is their major justification for their existence, at least to the outside. Some real utopias call their approach a “game changer” for overcoming the specific crises of their sectors of health care and resource use (*u-consume*: 30, *u/r-care*: 5). They regard their initiatives as pioneers, which can serve as a leitmotif for others. Many real utopias regard networking and the maintenance of personal contacts as major potential for social-political transformation (*r-work*, *u-work*, *u-agricult*, *r-develop*, *r-culture*). Participants of these real utopias state that they initiate exchange among people from different societal sectors that usually do not meet (*u-work*), that the project contributes to the experience of solidarity and to treating each other with more respect (*u-agricult*). While some real utopias, e.g. the urban and rural co-working spaces, emphasize the importance of networking for their transformational potential (*r-work*, *u-work*), other

⁴ Here, it must also be pointed out that this exploratory study is limited to the subjective standards and perspectives of the interview partners.

real utopias, e.g. the rural alternative school, consider networking as mostly exhausting and little helpful (*r-educ*). The founder of the rural alternative school, on the other hand, sees particular potential for socio-political transformation in the education of children, because they have not yet adopted the encrusted thought patterns, which have led to the multiple crises (*r-educ*).

Structural constraints and agency

Working against structural constraints

Some real utopias name systemic macro-level constraints of their specific sector as major limitations of their real utopian scope. For example, in the care sector the social reasons for illnesses, e.g. low wages, cannot be solved by small organizations and networks, but need to be addressed by macro-level political changes of the care sector (*u-care*). Thus, real utopias reach their limits due to systemic problems and constraints.

A defensive attitude against macro-level structural constraints can be found by many real utopias. For example, hierarchies are rejected, and there is a striving for a flat organizing, without a boss (*r-work*). Conventional agriculture is rejected, and organic food cultivation is strived for (*r-agricult*). An individual financing of housing is rejected, and models of financial solidarity structures has been developed (*u-house*).

Correspondingly, among all interviews, “solidarity” is mentioned most frequently in the interviews in combination with “financial situation of the project”, which might indicate elements of solidarity economy within these real utopias. Experimenting with new collective forms of organizing seems to be an important element of defense against structural constraints. A participant of an urban real utopia states that the major driver for founding the organization was the need for secure jobs and the aim of grassroots organization without profit optimization (*u-educ*). Similarly, the founder of an urban housing project remembers that the group “came from a left-wing political direction, were all crazy about collectives and everything like that” (*u-house*: 42).

Some participants explicitly strive for developing a utopian site, which is independently of socio-political crises and of politics in general (*u-consume*, *r-agricult*). However, at the same time they consider technological developments such as genetic engineering, and nuclear and digital technology as part of a perceived

growing military technocracy, which is powerful and leaves no space for agency: “You cannot do anything against it, it’s powerful” (*r-agricult*: 69).

Consciousness and experience of personal agency

While participants experience powerful structural constraints on the one hand, they also report on their growing individual agency. Two participants of rural real utopias state that they consciously try to shed fear in the light of crises:

“Now I could say: Oh my God. Oh shit, how terrible. Yes, then I am in the fear mode and definitely not able to carry anything positive forward. Therefore, I try again and again to get out of the mode of fear or out of the mode of threat and to always go back to: Where can I change something myself, how I imagine the world to be?” (*r-educ*: 325)

This participant notices that an enormous societal change is arising and states that crumbling structures can be scary. Therefore, she decides to remain able to act and to bear responsibility (*r-educ*). An urban real utopia states that they do not want to make demands on politics as they do not want to be dependent on politics, but rather want to concentrate on the things they can change as this is less frustrating (*u-consume*). Real utopias rather try to change things on a small scale than things that are socio-politically problematic on a macro-scale (*u-consume*, *u-care*). Besides the consciousness of agency, participants of real utopias talk about their experience of agency, e.g. “We said we just start and see what happens and a lot happened” (*r-consume*: 117). Another participant describes the good feeling of “often being able to help people in relatively desperate situations” (*u-care*: 56). The experience of agency can also be seen in descriptions of real utopias as an “experimental room” (*r-educ*: 36) or as a “mini biotope for societal designs” (*u-consume*: 145).

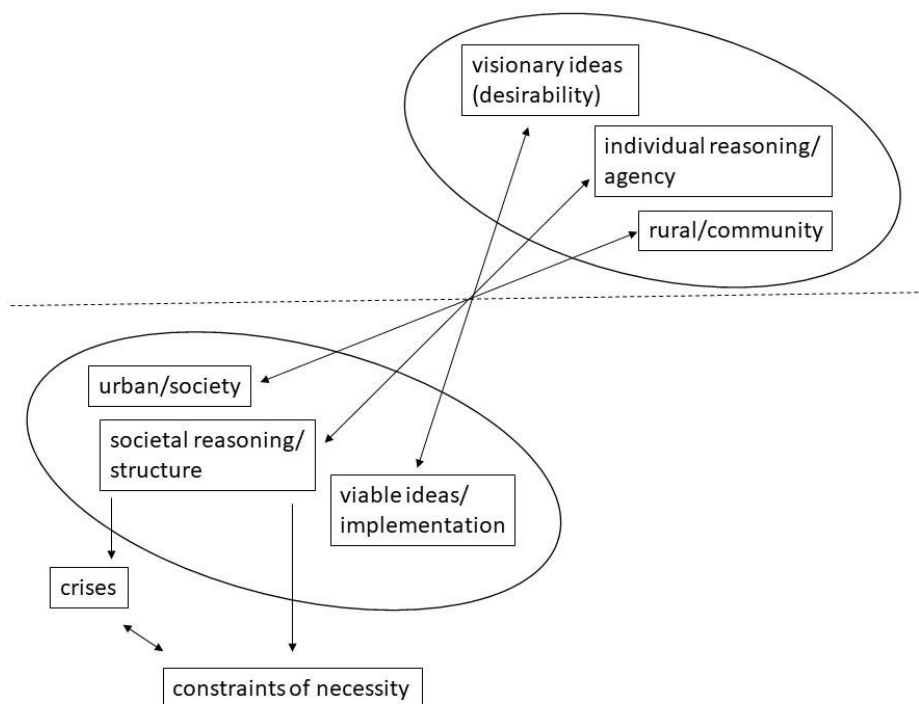
Discussion and outlook

Collecting and analyzing data in existing urban and rural real utopian organizations and networks provides only first insights into characteristics of organizing, micro-, meso- and macro-level visions and causes and consequences of real utopias. While the meso-level was first assumed and queried, it was partly missed out in the evaluation for reasons of parsimoniousness and a reduction of complexity as the findings were oftentimes overlapping between the three levels.

Looking at the differentiation between visionary, viable and achievable ideas of initiators and sustainers of real utopias, this exploratory study indicates that visionary ideas related to Wright’s category of “desirability” seem to be rather related to consciousness and experiences of individual agency and thus micro-level individual reasoning of participation. However, truly visionary ideas were hardly described in contrast to detailed expressions of “achievability”, which are mainly connected to macro-level financial and bureaucratic obstacles and narratives of crises. Thus, these expressions of implementation seem to be rather referred to societal reasoning and structural constraints of necessity.

Looking at the structurally-weak countryside and the development of a “new rurality” with interstitial niches as spaces for pioneers of transformation, it can be stated that the countryside indeed offers more space and opportunities for development for its inhabitants than urban real utopias. However, at the same time, the operators of rural real utopias rather focus on strategies of symbiosis than on interstitial niche strategies, which are applied more often by urban real utopias. Cooperating with all democratic parties as well as being effective through private engagement and neighborhood contacts without formalized structures seems to be more common in rural than in urban real utopias.

Figure 2: Identifiable interrelationships of the dimensions examined



Tönnies (1887) defined the important difference of “Gemeinschaft” (community) and “Gesellschaft” (society) in the urbanized world of the 19th century. This difference is still important in interpreting our real utopias in the countryside and in the city. Rural real utopias are rather structured by community relations, based on family, neighborhood and friendship. Urban real utopias are more institutionalized, they defend their principles mostly against societal structures, which are based on anonymous self-interest and profit optimization. Urban real utopias accept societal structures in their work, e.g. strategically organizing and formally communicating, more often than rural real utopias, who act and understand themselves less institutionalized and formalized. Hence, formal organizing as strategic politics seems to be more frequent in the city than in the countryside. Correspondingly, urban real utopias point more to the positive effects of strategically networking, which fosters hope and courage, while rural real utopias rather highlight the relaxing effect of escaping from crises and retreating as a personal source of resilience and hope.

Existential fears and doubts about the long-term feasibility of a real utopia are only mentioned by urban real utopias, due to personal exhaustion and to financing difficulties caused by the real estate market. Such hindrances are less existential threats in rural real utopias. Most interview partners of rural real utopias have an urban biography; they consciously decided to move to the countryside, e.g., for better opportunities for personal development. However, the moving cause is not focused only on individual reasons; it implies possibilities for keeping up and realizing structural visionary ideas in the light of global crises, beyond the individual experience of agency. Rural real utopias seem to be more connected to desirability and visionary thinking as well as individual agency than urban real utopias (figure 2). In view of these exploratory results, the significance of the awareness of crises should to be further investigated as a cause for establishing real utopias. As representatives of rural real utopias addressed their dealing with societal crises and resilience more often than urban real utopias, this supposedly stronger awareness of crises in the countryside remains to be researched in more detail. None of the real utopias questions the need for a wide socio-political transformation and most of them explicitly describe their political ideas of contributing to a transformation as a reason for establishing their real utopia. However, different organizations refer to different transformation strategies. Regarding the two strategic logics of “reducing harms” and “transcending structures” (Chertkovskaya 2022: 62), it can be summed up that none

of the real utopias seeks for a sharp confrontation with existing institutions and social structures and therefore none of them can be assigned to ruptural “halting” or revolutionary violent strategies. Participants that distance themselves from macro-level global crises can be assigned to logics of ‘escaping by real utopias’. This escaping strategy as a positive personal effect is more common in the countryside. Only a few urban real utopias set themselves the very high transformative goal of a ruptural, interstitial or symbiotic transformation of society. It is striking that particularly urban real utopias report personal and group exhaustion, and work overload. The “art of small steps” might to be a more durable and healthy way of dealing with micro- and macro-level expectations of participants and thus might be worth to investigate.

Several findings indicate further need of deeper investigation. This refers to the different trends within real utopias of different societal sectors. An urban care real utopia expresses optimism regarding possibilities of regular funding in the future. A rural cultural real utopia, on the other hand, is pessimistic regarding their financial situation since a long-term, institutional funding appears unattainable and funding opportunities are becoming scarce. Here, a deepened comparison of real utopias of different societal sectors in urban and rural areas could bring further insights into reasons for potentials and hindrances. Therefore, a subsequent study should gather more data about the different life areas covered here, but also should including other life areas, such as the mobility sector, or issues of discrimination and poverty. A future study building on this exploration should also shed light on urban and rural real utopias that have been founded or taken over by right-wing ideologues. Moreover, experiences of failure on the micro-, meso- and macro level, and a theoretical deeper understanding of the functions of real utopias in the power-balancing triangle of market, state and civil society, should be studied based on empirical data. The question of the individual’s current biographical position in life as a precondition for participating in a real utopia was queried, but remains to be further analyzed. A pensioner of a rural housing project mentions that he failed to involve refugee families, since these families had to ensure their basic needs and thus had no capacities to participate their utopian project development. Here, the oftentimes-proclaimed accessibility and openness of real utopias must be further researched in the light of rather sophisticated organizing structures, and the higher educational standard of participants might possibly exclude less privileged people to participate.

Regarding a further analysis of organizing real utopias, principles and practices of degrowth, commoning and of solidarity economy, first data can be found within this study. However, such conceptualizations of real utopian practices must be further investigated in regard to motivations and effects. In addition, the theoretical framework must be enlarged and probably partially revised; here, the relevance of a theoretical classification of real utopian practices based on comprehensive data might be insightful. Furthermore, mutual clichés about the rural and the urban population became apparent in this study. Many differences between urban and rural real utopias concerning individual and societal reasoning as well as the degrees of visionary thinking became clear. To analyze further these and other imaginaries of organizing real utopias in city and countryside, the future study will be expanded by focus groups with urban and rural participants of real utopias. Since visions of participants are oftentimes covered by dealing with predominant structural constraints, a further methodological question is which appropriate methods could make visions of participants more accessible for further research.⁵

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⁵ We plan to expand this research in the near future. With additional research funding, the project will be enlarged to an international and cross-cultural comparison as part of a German-Israeli research cooperation. The commitment of the Israeli university partner exists. This collaborative study would also include the participation of the international Global Ecovillage Network, networks of Israeli Kibbutzim, and further associations and interest groups of real utopian projects in both countries.

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