

► Project *brief*

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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Volunteering in terms of spatial and social inequalities

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- **There are significant differences in volunteering rates based on education level; those with higher education are more likely to volunteer, while those with lower education are less likely to volunteer.**
- **Volunteering rates are particularly high in rural areas with a good socio-economic situation, especially in western Germany.**
- **In rural areas, individuals with higher incomes and without a migration background, as well as men, have comparatively better opportunities to participate.**

Context and objectives

Volunteering is widely recognised as being of great importance for social participation and the cohesion of society. This is especially relevant to rural areas on the periphery, where it would be impossible to maintain services such as sports and leisure, mobility, rescue, and disaster control without the assistance of local volunteers. In peripheral areas there are typically limited opportunities for social leisure activities and participation, particularly in rural areas affected by structural change processes. Additionally, the out-migration of younger and more highly educated individuals is reducing the number of potentially committed individuals. Against this background, it is expected that there will be spatial inequalities in volunteering. Initial research results also indicate that there are social inequalities in volunteering. In policy terms, this means that certain groups, defined by socio-demographic characteristics or geographical affiliation, systematically have better access to engagement and its benefits (such as opportunities for social participation and voice, social networks and social capital), while other groups do not have these opportunities to the same extent.

Politically and socially, it would be desirable to counteract these inequalities and thus give all people in Germany the same opportunity to participate and integrate. The basis for this is first of all a fundamental, systematic description and documentation of inequalities in volunteering. In the SA:FE project („Special Analysis: Volunteering in different spatial types“), we systematically analysed possible differences in volunteering, focusing, among other things, on the following questions:

1. How is volunteering distributed within different spatial types (Thünen typology) and between regions (East and West Germany), and how does this distribution change over time?

2. In which areas is the population of Germany in general, and in rural and non-rural areas, primarily involved? Are there differences between spatial types or regions?

Approach

Quantitative analyses were conducted using survey data from the German Survey on Volunteering (2019) and the Socio-Economic Panel (2001-2019). The analysis involved a comparison of engagement across various spatial types and socio-demographic groups, while also examining potential factors that may influence engagement. This methodological approach allows for the identification and interpretation of fundamental patterns and correlations in the area of engagement.

Results

In regard to spatial differences, there is generally a higher level of engagement in rural areas than in non-rural areas. Participation is particularly high in very rural areas, in rural areas with a good socio-economic situation and in western Germany. Sociodemographic inequalities are particularly marked in terms of age, gender, educational attainment, religiosity, household type and income, and migrant background.

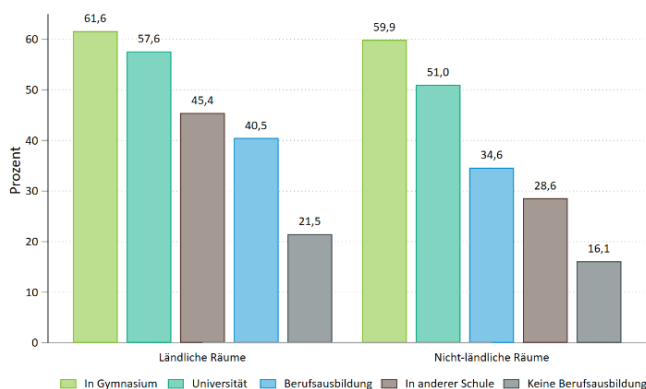
1. The proportion of young people volunteering is particularly high compared to other age groups and increases significantly over the period. Particularly in rural areas, parental involvement is crucial to young people's volunteering.
2. Particularly in the older age groups and in (very) rural areas with a good socio-economic situation, a significantly higher proportion of men are involved in institutionalised forms of volunteering. Women, on the other hand, are slightly more likely to be involved in non-institutionalised forms. Men and women are also more likely to be involved in different areas than people of the opposite sex. For example, men are much

more likely to volunteer in 'Sports and exercise', 'Politics' and 'Accident and emergency services or fire brigade', while women are more likely to volunteer in 'School or kindergarten' and 'Social services'.

- The analyses show clear educational differences that can already be observed among pupils who have not yet completed their education, according to the type of school. A higher level of education or a higher educational aspiration is associated with a higher proportion of volunteering. This is the case for all types of volunteering, with the exception of 'Accident and emergency services or fire brigade'.
- Higher household income is also associated with more volunteering.
- Religiosity also plays a role in volunteering, with significantly higher and increasing proportions of churchgoers volunteering compared to non-churchgoers over time.
- Inequality in engagement is also evident with regard to migration background, particularly in the case of institutionalised engagement. People with direct or indirect migration experience are significantly less (institutionally) involved than people without migration experience.
- Couples with children are more likely to engage in volunteering activities than other types of households.
- In rural areas, gender, household income, and migration background exhibit greater differences than in non-rural areas. Males, individuals from higher-income households and those without a migration background tend to have greater ease in engaging.

- Voluntary organisations often recruit individuals who share similar characteristics with their current members and volunteers, such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and educational background. This can lead to the perpetuation of social inequalities. Raising awareness of homophilic recruitment practices and consciously counteracting them is crucial. Therefore, it is important to pay more attention to underrepresented groups of people and target them. Appropriate strategies can counteract social inequality and the lack of young volunteers in rural areas, which is often lamented by clubs.
- Simultaneously, the rise of informal and non-institutional volunteering indicates that current institutionalised volunteering opportunities are not equally appealing to everyone. To ensure equal opportunities for all, informal forms of engagement should also be encouraged and supported. For instance, self-help groups or migrant networks could be given greater consideration.
- Removing barriers to participation in volunteering is crucial. This can be achieved by providing easily accessible information to all individuals, regardless of their educational level. Concrete measures could include providing targeted information about potential volunteering opportunities in all types of schools by volunteer organizations and associations, as well as establishing contacts with potential volunteers.
- Establishing collaborative partnerships between local political and administrative bodies and volunteer organisations is essential to reach out to marginalised groups and facilitate their access to volunteering. These partnerships allow for collaboration on volunteer support and training, knowledge sharing, awareness-raising on discriminatory recruitment practices, and joint efforts on mobility, financial support, and equipment.


Figure: Volunteering by education in rural and non-rural areas



Source: Kleiner and Kühn (2023: 53).

Recommendations

How can individuals with limited education, pupils from schools other than grammar schools, those without affiliation to religious institutions, individuals with a migration background, single parents and those with a low household income be better integrated into the field of volunteering?

Further Information			
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