

Village Renewal in Lower Austria

Importance of the programme

Village Renewal is a big issue in the policy of the province of Lower Austria, one of the nine Federal Provinces of the Federal Republic of Austria, although the amount of money granted by the government is rather modest (annual costs: about 3,2 Million Euros).

The Governor of Lower Austria, Dr. Erwin Pröll has started the programme and promotes it strongly.

Some facts

The main direction of Village Renewal in Lower Austria is to strengthen local communities. The participation of many members of the communities in the planning process as well as in the steps of putting the plans into practice brings a high standard of quality of the projects accompanied by a high grade of acceptance.

Our model of direct participation of every person interested in the shape of her direct living space has been realized in about 700 villages with inhabitants between 100 and 5.000. For bigger places we have the action of Town Renewal. The biggest town of Lower Austria has about 50.000 inhabitants.

The "Village Renewal Programme" was announced in 1985. A small administrative organization was set up as well as a non profit Organisation, which enforces the interests of the villages and provides support for self-aid. Employees of this Organisation spend most of their time going to the villages and assist the inhabitants of the villages in their work.

The „Guidelines for the Preservation and Renewal of Rural Communities“ were first drawn up in 1985. The last changes were made in 1998.

Those guidelines relate to the principles, bodies, processes and instruments of Village Renewal in Lower Austria. The target for village renewal is not only the village, but the entire rural habitat. In spatial terms of application the village is regarded as indivisible unit comprising a number of dwellings with the landscape around.

Principles for Village Renewal

The guidelines set out the following principles for village regeneration:

- The village and the rural area should maintain and strengthen their cultural distinctiveness from urban areas, thus preserving a healthy tension.
- In rural areas the regional economic circulation should be reinforced by the development of regional activities making use of regional strengths, and a high degree of self-sufficiency should be achieved in economic, social and cultural terms.
- The independence of the villages should be reinforced by the development and promotion of individual responsibility and self-aid among the population.

Areas of Activities

Defined areas of activity are:

- improvement of the village structure and design
- renovation of buildings
- utilization of local energy resources (energy plan)
- assuring and improving the ecology
- socio-cultural renewal
- improvement of the structure of agricultural undertakings
- assuring a reasonable standard of living

How the programme is working

The province of Lower Austria bears most of the costs of the assistance to the villages made by the professional motivators and moderators of the process.

The provincial government also pays subsidies for local projects depending on the size of the project with costs between a few hundred Euros and about 15.000 Euros. In no case the subsidy can be higher than half of the total costs. Normally the subsidy is much less than 50 %.

The professional moderators need a high social and communicative competence which provides optimal support for the working together of all interest groups in the planning and decision process.

Programme of Sustainability

Since 2004 local communities can participate in a programme of Sustainability (Local Agenda 21) within the Village Renewal Programme ("Gemeinde 21"). This programme is not aimed for single villages as centers of living but for the administrative unit of communities. Most communities consist of a handful of villages, bigger town administrations often include a couple of dozen villages.

Competition

In an annual competition individuals and organizations can submit projects following the philosophy of Village Renewal. Up to 50 % of the costs are given to the winners of this competition.

Special Unit for architecture

Within the administration of Lower Austria an own administrative unit was set up dealing with the issue of architecture in the villages. This unit is called „Ortsbildstelle“. They edit a brochure called „Niederösterreich gestalten“ (i.e. „Design Lower Austria“) six times a year.

In former years it propagated the preservation of old buildings, now it has set its main focus on a positive relation between old and new architecture. Energy-saving buildings are a big issue for this unit.

Regional, national and supranational level

Quite a few measures important for human life can be settled locally, but many issues have to be solved on the regional, national or even supranational level. Regional structures and activities are necessary to ensure a good development of rural areas and make Village Regeneration really effective.

Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) – Facts and Figures

Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) is often described as the 'province around Vienna' because, from a geographical point of view, Vienna, which is Austria's capital and at the same time a separate federal province, is located in the centre of Niederösterreich - similar to the situation of Berlin and Brandenburg in Germany. Vienna had also been for a long time the seat of the provincial government of Niederösterreich. 1986 St. Pölten was chosen as provincial capital and in 1997, the provincial government, provincial administration and provincial parliament, followed by other important institutions were transferred to St. Pölten.

Niederösterreich has the largest area and the second largest population (after Vienna) of the nine federal provinces in Austria. Niederösterreich is bordered to the north by the Czech Republic and to the east by Slovakia, where the river system of Thaya and March marks the frontier line. In the south, the foothills of the Eastern Alps form a natural boundary with Steiermark. In the south-east, Niederösterreich borders the Burgenland and this is where the province also has a share in the Pannonian Plateau, which then stretches into Hungary which is a scant 4 km away. The Danube plays a very prominent role in both topographical and historical terms. This river, which was once the northern boundary of the Roman Empire, is the lifeline of the region and divides Niederösterreich into a northern part with the Wald- and Weinviertel and a southern part with the Most- and Industrieviertel. The Danube has been of great importance since historical times as a transport artery, and today it forms part of the Rhine-Main-Danube canal, linking the Atlantic to the Black Sea.

Niederösterreich is of crucial importance in the history of Austria, for it is in connection with the Niederösterreich town of Neuhofen/Ybbs that we find the first recorded mention of the name Austria as 'Ostarrichi' (Österreich), over one thousand years ago.

However, Niederösterreich is not only the historical heart of Austria, with countless cultural points of interest, it is also important from the economic point of view, for this province generates the bulk of Austria's agricultural produce as well as featuring a highly developed industrial sector. In addition, the region has major sources of raw materials as well as extensive leisure facilities which offer good tourist connections.

The name 'Niederösterreich = Lower Austria' needs a word of explanation, for it sometimes gives rise to incorrect associations. The prefix 'Nieder = Lower' has nothing to do with being flat or low, in fact it refers to the position of this province with regard to the river Enns, whose lower course forms the boundary between the provinces of Oberösterreich and Niederösterreich. Viewed from Bavaria to the east, this German province was very important to the development of modern-day Austria in the early Middle Ages, Niederösterreich lies 'below' the Enns. So the name Niederösterreich derives etymologically from this fact: it refers to the land "below" the Enns - as opposed to the region "above" the Enns, which accordingly is known today as "Oberösterreich = Upper Austria".

Position:	In the North-East of Austria (the province around Vienna)
Area:	19,178 km ²
Population:	1.57 million
Households:	approximately 623,000
Citizenship:	Austrians: 93,82 % EU-citizens (except Austrians): 1,82 % Non-EU-citizens: 4,35 %
Capital:	St. Pölten (50,000 inhabitants)
Districts:	25 administrative districts
Municipalities:	573
Major rivers:	Danube, Enns, March, Thaya, Traisen, Ybbs
Highest elevation:	Schneeberg (2,075 m)
Lowest point:	Municipality of Berg in the district of Bruck/Leitha (129 m)
Provincial boundaries:	414 km (Czech Republic: 333 km, Slovakia: 81 km)