

Cultural-Touristic Network Altenkirchen – Perspective in Development

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Abstract

Altenkirchen is situated in Westerwald/Raiffeisen region of Germany (between the cities of Bonn, Cologne, Mainz and Wiesbaden) and in addition to the 7,000 city inhabitants includes 42 municipalities with a further 24,000 people. It is a city torn between the local and global economies, between living space and non-places of movement and between its small historical centers and the open countryside (Sieverts, 2003).

The city has only a limited chance to present itself on the national market as there are no particular visible highlights; neither in production, nor tourism potential. It is undisputed that cities are currently competing (both intra and internationally) to increase economic power, produce creative milieus, protect soil and reduce socio economic differences to keep and attract young and well educated residents.

In order to counterbalance Altenkirchens main disadvantages a search for a model oriented solution was initiated. The municipality of Altenkirchen approached us in this connection to create a concept for strengthening economic and cultural issues.

Keywords: cultural-touristic networks, economies of scope, sustainable local development, local competitive advantage

Introduction

Within the context of two studies: „Advancement of the Culture Economy and Tourism in the Raiffeisen Region“ (media K GmbH, 2009) and „ Advancement of Companies Engaged in Culture Sector and Commerce in the Raiffeisen Region“ (Verein für Kultur und Arbeit, 2009) made in consortium with Vienna University of Technology and those two German partners, the potentials of Altenkirchen region have been surveyed in order to examine the possibilities of establishing cultural tourism development in combining culture, tourism and business sectors.

According to Steinecke (2007) a culture is one tourism resource with a long tradition, living present and promising future. Big European cities, like Berlin, Hamburg, London etc. have already successfully combined and incorporated this sector as important segment of their economic growth. However, the small cities and their rural regions, like Altenkirchen with low economic

power and low urban and creative density can hardly copy the established methods, which the major cities implemented to generate these extra benefits. Apart from densely built up area, there are many other difficulties, with which these cities have to confront: high percentage of emigration, obsolescent, insufficient infrastructure and unemployment make these cities less attractive than the metropolitan regions.

Method

In the framework of both studies, cultural and tourism resources for further cultural-tourism orientation in tourism development were explored and analysed. They showed evidence of a huge number of local actors in cultural, tourism and commercial sectors. The detailed analysis of the cultural sector revealed some well established local initiatives which succeed in performing the art and cultural events. A local society “Haus Felsenkeller” mostly focused on providing music events and performing arts; or an art initiative from Erwin Wortelkamp and the project “Art in the Valley” show the depth of cultural resources.

All of these local sector representatives provide different services and events, but they are acting as single players, so that each of them offers its different product independently. Besides, dealing with low populated and densely built-up area, in the case of Altenkirchen, these providers are scattered across the bright landscape, with little chance to attract enough visitors.

The outcomes of the further research revealed that the region Altenkirchen, despite of the various tourism attractions, was insufficiently promoted through regional tourism offices and as such stayed invisible for many potential customers. In that way the present situation of culture-tourism services was not in the position to a) sufficiently promote the region in order to produce positive economic effects and b) strengthen the preservation and development of culture. It was more than obvious, that Altenkirchen needs set of well planned actions which could on one hand use and connect already preset local values and resources and on the other enable a new form of economic development.

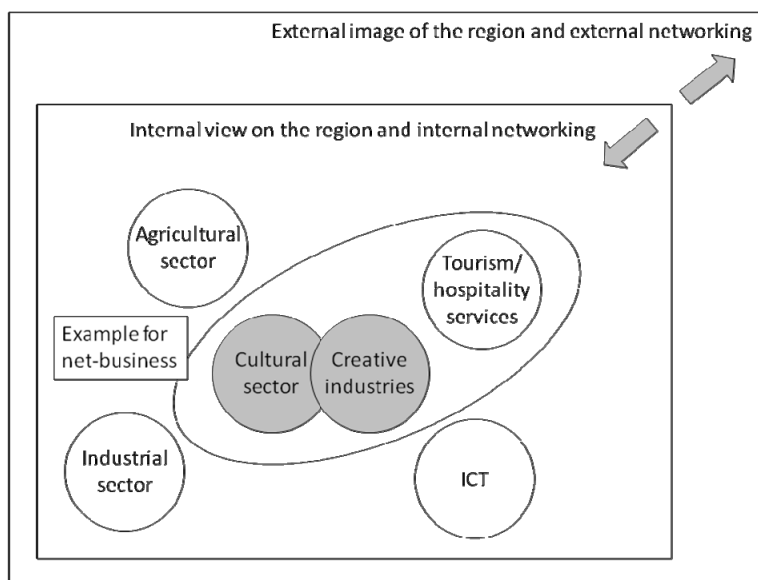
Application of results

Based on the network theory, a new idea of how it would be possible to solve the set of problems in Altenkirchen has been developed. Both studies conclude that an alternative sustainable approach (previously unknown in small sized cities and rural regions in Germany) would be to initiate a cultural-touristic network Altenkirchen *AKulTour.net* for promotion of the region.

The network connects various local players that are active in cultural, tourism and commercial sectors. It allows new processes of exchange and value creation and strengthens the feeling of community. The cultural-touristic network applied for example in Altenkirchen is according to Lynch and Morrison (in Michael, 2007) a mechanism that enhances the ability of small business operators to offer competitive products within a local region.

The conceptual model proposed by following figure (Fig 1) illustrates that cultural-touristic network, can extend its networking domain on other local economy sectors. In that way network can explore additional synergies and diversify own products with other complementary services. In the same time, network initiative positively affects the image of the region, fostering its common purpose and focus (inside the region) and appearing as potential strong partner for future networking (outside the region).

Figure 1: Model of culture-touristic network with other potential networking sectors in region



Source: Vienna University of Technology, 2009

Following the outcome of research, the participating parties in the Altenkirchen cultural-touristic network includes both complementary and competitive local providers, which by concept corresponds with Michael’s (2007) diagonal cluster type. In this study the terms network and cluster are used synonymously. Through co-operation, local providers add value to each other by joining their capacities together and committing themselves “...to create a complete product, which the customer can purchase as a single item.” (Michael, 2007). In that way services which used to be isolated get completely new importance for customers, when clustered in saleable packages. In contrast with horizontal (e.g. chain of hotel accommodations in ski resorts) and vertical clusters (e.g. car industry), diagonal ones purchase an optimal outcome because variety of firms, by

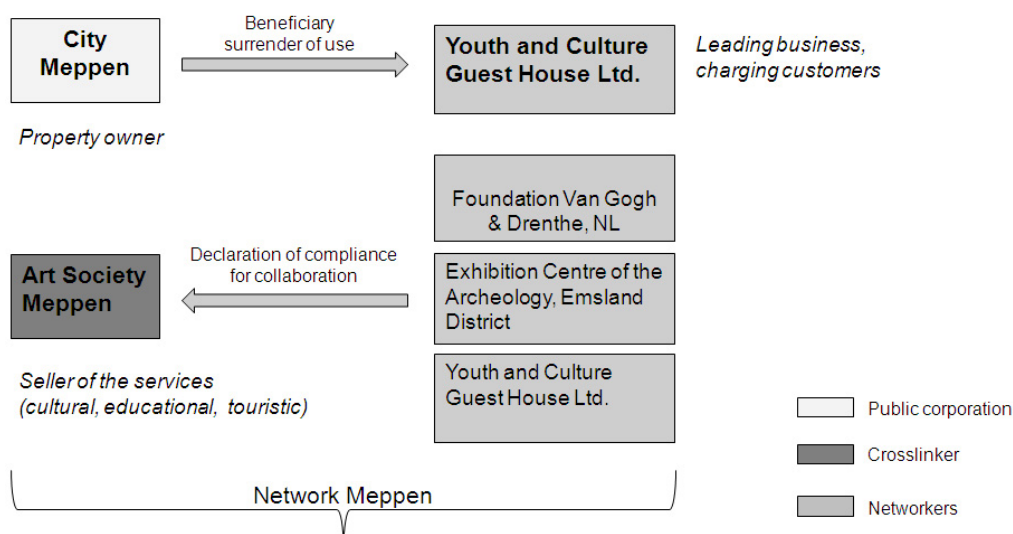
supplementing the original services, adds value of tourism experience and in that case enhance the locality`s particular competitive advantage (cf. Michael 2007).

The deficiencies evident in the case of Altenkirchen; such as sparsely built-up and populated area as well as low spatial density and low promotion level of cultural-touristic services should be balanced by the operation of the AKulTour.net network. At the time of writing the network is working on creating a system, which will:

1. promote cultural-touristic services on one place
2. offer unique booking system for all services (one face to the customer)
3. bundle different services into target-group oriented packages

Further research of the AKulTour.net network showed an urgent need for defining the formality of its structure, in other words: a commitment assurance between network entities. Referring to Gibson, Lynch und Morrison (2005) these networks are either formal or semi-formal exchange networks i.e. the network actors need to regulate their exchange relationships through bilateral agreements or establish a separate association, a limited company or similar structure, for the network organization. A successful model was identified in further research, a case study of Meppen (Germany), where two crucial partners appear: Art Society Meppen (selling the services, face to the customer), and Youth and Culture Guest house Ltd (accommodation, leading in business and charging customers). All other institutions of cultural and touristic sectors are service providers and commit themselves over certain declaration of compliance for collaboration with the Art society. Following simplified scheme (Fig 2) illustrates mentioned structure.

Figure 2: Structure of the culture-touristic network Meppen, Germany



Source: Vienna University of Technology, 2009

As the time of writing the AKulTour.net network is establishing a Society of its own, but still without a clear relationship concept between the single network entities. The well proven business model of the Meppen network could still be a potential concept.

The experiences so far have shown that the transition from social interconnected networks and real net-business oriented exchange processes, which are the tendency in our point of research, can be a big gap for the local sectors in small and rural areas. The Altenkirchen case showed how local policy bodies can take this first step in playing an effective role in initiating, financing and supporting the early phase of network development. Beyond that, Michael and Hall (in Michael, 2007) claim that when the cluster approach is to have a policy application in the process of local development, its practice still need to be compatible with, and supportive of, the contemporary economic and social roles of government. This can be very useful having in mind that the core of network represents mostly private sectors including their demands of different natures (Polese in Girard/Nijkamp, 2009). The local development carried by culture-touristic networks, should be both, economically and socially sustainable. In this observation support of local government is of great importance.

However, if such culture-touristic networks are initiated with the aim to become self-supporting mechanism of local development, government support should be determined in some particular time frame. Autonomously from local policy bodies, the network still has to be managed by some kind of coordinating center, which represents the network toward the outside and clears communication channels among network partners. This was clearly confirmed after survey among participants in first network project conducted in summer last year.

Apart from enhanced business activity and pursuing of community values, there is third benefit, according to Lynch and Morrison (in Michael, 2007), valuable both for network members and its host community, namely learning and exchange. Mixed-sector network in Altenkirchen, confronted difficulties in development process, because origin focuses of cultural and economic sectors showed little understanding of each other's working processes. That is why learning and exchange, meaning: transfer of knowledge and of business experience, as well as communication of their particular needs, should be one of the regulars of network development in the long run.

The results of the first AKulTour.net network project in Altenkirchen have not been very profitable, but they showed that if they want to achieve long term effects they need time to realize and accept risks and benefits carried by network processes.

Findings

In conclusion let us say, that through the planned development of culture - touristic business networks and the targeted linking of people engaged in the cultural and touristic sector as well as with other civic service providers (a) a new instrument and (b) an overall concept for the sustainable touristic, cultural and social development for the cities like Altenkirchen can be achieved. The case of the AKulTur.net network gives us a chance to explore development processes and direct impacts of implementing this new instrument on small communities.

The evaluation of preliminary findings showed following important facts/preconditions which if not solved or dealt with, appear as success critical factors.

1. Cultural, tourism and other service providers in small cities and rural surroundings are often scattered across the local landscape. As such and acting alone, they often cannot produce enough positive effects, which could enhance the growth of local economic and social development.
2. Culture-touristic networks in small sized cities and rural districts do not emerge on their own. They need an impulse to start up, a task which could be successfully taken on by representatives of the local policy bodies.
3. Formal structures of culture-touristic network need to be determined and such that obligatory participation of each network partner is assured.
4. The coordination centers apart from local government bodies must be provided as leading parts of the network organisation.
5. In order to overcome big differences between cultural and economic sectors, both sides need to accept the fact, that they need time to grow, to initiate the processes of mutual learning and exchange.

These preconditions do not affect the autonomy of each participant, because they can still act as independent companies, but they have to find a way to oblige them to effectively participate.

There is still need for further research, especially when it comes to definition of the business deals within the network structures, as well as other organizational parameters like, coordination, initiation and financial support. For this reason the AkulTour.net network in Altenkirchen is continuously being accompanied and surveyed with expectation to reveal further significant insights in developing and processing of culture tourism networks in small and rural cities.

The intermediate results of the research have been discussed and validated with experts on international conferences in Europe (UK; Romania, Germany, Austria etc.).

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