

## INFORMALITY AS CRISIS MANAGEMENT? – WORK RELATIONSHIPS IN INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN RHINELAND-PALATINATE, GERMANY

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With 2 figures and 1 appendix

Received 22 October 2021 · Accepted 21 June 2022

**Summary:** Planning and networking are largely determined not only by existing regulations, but also by human relationships. Formal work relationships in professional contexts benefit in particular from informal communication, which in turn gives these work relationships a personal aspect. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting control measures were also challenging for work relationships, including those in planning contexts. A planning project in Germany, which forms the basis for this article, demonstrates this. Qualitative research was used to investigate the impact of the pandemic on project work and how the project participants dealt with the pandemic. Through comparative and retrospective observations of the cooperation over time, it was possible to identify participants' strategies to continue work on the project. This analysis is based on 25 qualitative stakeholder interviews. The results show that the pandemic had varying impacts on the project's networks. The strategic use of informal communication contributed significantly to the continuation of the project's work, although this communication was used in different ways. In addition, for a long time, the project stakeholders were neither aware of the differentiation between formal and informal communication, nor of the relevance of informal communication. Analysing this understanding represents a central aspect of this article. In sum, strengthening informality in formal planning projects contributes to their success.

**Zusammenfassung:** Planung und Netzwerkarbeit werden neben bestehenden Regulierungen maßgeblich von menschlichen Beziehungen bestimmt. Dabei profitieren formelle Geschäftsbeziehungen in der professionellen Zusammenarbeit insbesondere von informellem Austausch, welcher diesen Geschäftsbeziehungen einen persönlichen Aspekt verleiht. Auch Planungsprojekte und die Beziehungen der Projektbeteiligten wurden von der COVID-19-Pandemie und den resultierenden Maßnahmen zur Eindämmung der Pandemie herausgefordert. In einem Planungsprojekt in Deutschland, welches die Grundlage für diesen Beitrag bildet, konnte dies während der COVID-19-Pandemie untersucht werden. Mittels qualitativer Forschung wurden die Fragen nach den Auswirkungen der Pandemie auf die Projektarbeit sowie dem Umgang der Projektbeteiligten mit der Pandemie untersucht. Durch zeitphasenvergleichende sowie retrospektive Betrachtungen der Zusammenarbeit konnten Strategien der Beteiligten zur Aufrechterhaltung der Projektarbeit identifiziert werden. Die Analyse basiert auf 25 qualitativen Stakeholder-Interviews. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sich die Pandemie unterschiedlich auf die Netzwerke des Projektes auswirkte. Die strategische Nutzung von informellem Austausch war tragende Säule bei der Fortführung der pandemiebedingt eingeschränkten Projektarbeit. Gleichzeitig waren den Projektbeteiligten lange Zeit weder die Differenzierung zwischen formell und informell, noch die Relevanz informellen Austauschs bewusst. Die Analyse dieses Verständnisses spielt dabei eine zentrale Rolle des Artikels. Der Beitrag kommt zu dem Ergebnis, dass die Stärkung von Informalität in formellen Projekten zu deren Erfolg beiträgt.

**Keywords:** Planning, informality, work relationships, COVID-19 pandemic, Rhineland-Palatinate

### 1 Introduction

Informality is a widely discussed concept in the geographical and planning literature. The discourse revolves around economic (e.g. ETZOLD et al. 2009, GANDY 2006), political (e.g. INNES et al. 2007), social (e.g. WATSON 2009a) and spatial informalities (e.g. BEIER 2021, LOMBARD & METH 2017), as well as the question of power (e.g. ROY 2005). These categories undoubtedly emerge through human interactions. The interactions are therefore of key interest

for the analysis and conceptualisation of informality. Although legislation is crucial to planning, the planners themselves – i.e. human actors – and their interactions are fundamental for planning (RYDIN 2018). The question of how these interactions manifest themselves when some of their basic parameters are distorted, e.g. by an external disruption, is an interesting object of research.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to combat it have completely changed everyday life. Lockdowns have shifted work to the private



sphere, and contact restrictions have made meetings difficult, moved them to the digital space, or prevented them altogether. Since then, the pandemic has presented unique, unprecedented challenges, which also applies to planning projects.

In order to strengthen rural areas, inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) has emerged as a planning strategy for municipalities to face the growing challenges of a globalised world. Since 2018, municipalities in two model areas in the German Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate have been cooperating on a project that promotes IMC entitled ‘*Starke Kommunen – Starkes Land*’ (Strong Municipalities – Strong Federal State, SKSL, Mdl 2021). Since the size and common experiences of the municipalities varied greatly, the two model areas focused on different aspects of the project from the very beginning. Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a global(ised) health crisis, added to the challenges of this planning project. The aim of the research in this article was to find out exactly how the pandemic affected the two model areas, and how the planning networks of the two model areas responded to the pandemic. The extraordinary control measures led to SKSL participants lamenting in particular the lack of face-to-face and informal communication. In other words, government officials emphasised the importance of informality in this planning project. Another key concern of the research was therefore to determine the strategies stakeholders used to sustain the project during the pandemic.

The case of SKSL is that of a state-led planning project that was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and that illustrates the importance of informality in this process. To present this case, the following section explains the concept of informality and introduces IMC to provide the necessary theoretical background. Subsequently, the SKSL project and the methodological approach for the analysis of the two SKSL planning networks are presented. Building on this, the text outlines how the pandemic affected the project, how informality contributed to ensuring functionality and, most importantly, what informality means in this context.

## 2 Theoretical background

In the past, informality has for the most part been seen as a thorn in the side of planners, or at best a challenge (see WATSON 2009b). This was mainly due to the fact that (urban) informality was, for a long time, equated with informal economic activi-

ties and housing, predominantly undertaken by the urban poor in the Global South (HANSEN & VAA 2004, MCFARLANE & WAIBEL 2016). However, this specific view ignores the power relations inevitably intertwined when labelling something as ‘informal’ (LOMBARD & METH 2017: 158, PORTER 2018: 170). The seeming dichotomy of formal/informal is therefore itself imbalanced, as one side has the power to label the other as ‘informal’. This has been further challenged by case studies that refer to informality as planning practice or strategy (INNES et al. 2007, LOMBARD & METH 2017, MACLEOD & JONES 2011, ROY 2011). By considering this power-laden terminology, scholars have advocated a more differentiated understanding of informality with respect to a mode of urbanisation or the (new) urban norm (ROY & ALSAYYAD 2004, WATSON 2009a). As a result, informality has ultimately found its way into planning theory, and can thus be considered part of planning (see EDENSOR & JAYNE 2012, FAINSTEIN & DEFILIPPIS 2016, GUNDER et al. 2018, JAYNE & WARD 2017).

Providing a comprehensive definition of informality in planning, VAN ASSCHE et al. (2018: 226) emphasised that there was no universal understanding, and that the distinction between formal and informal has always been case-dependent. What is more, it is not static, but can change over time within the same case (ibid: 227). ALTROCK (2016: 175) went further, stating that informality was not necessarily “a deviation from the formal rules... First, one may think of informal interaction in a setting that is not yet covered by formal rules. Secondly, informal interaction can be understood as behaviour in a framework of informal institutions that are replacing formal ones where they do not work properly.” Moreover, BODE & WILHELM (2014: 20) argued that every (planning) network always has its own set of informal rules that influence cooperation among actors depending on the respective situation. These sets of informal rules are continuously adapted as the situation itself changes. This ultimately leads to an understanding that there is neither distinct formality nor informality. The reality is rather a hybrid arrangement in which both exist (ALTROCK 2016, VAN ASSCHE et al. 2018).

Many current academic works on regional planning deal with informality in some respects. While some have criticised the rise of informality as part of a neoliberal development of governance-led planning (HARRISON et al. 2021, SMAS & SCHMITT 2021), others have analysed the interconnectedness of formality/informality in practice (see MÄNTYSALO & BÄCKLUND 2018, VAN STRAALEN & WITTE 2018).

The discourse on *soft spaces* in particular has been a demonstration of the latter (see ALLMENDINGER et al. 2014, ZIMMERBAUER & PAASI 2020). Soft spaces are planning spaces that are detached from existing administrative spatial boundaries due to functional interdependencies and/or common spatial problems, and are thus *de jure* informal (ALLMENDINGER & HAUGHTON 2009, GÖRGL et al. 2020: 379–380). IMC offers an illustrative example of soft spaces (GÖRGL et al. 2020). The idea of IMC is that municipalities pool their resources to increase their efficiency in meeting common challenges at the regional level (BBSR 2018, FRICK & HOKKELER 2008, FURKERT 2008, REUTTER 2015, SCHULITZ & KNOBLAUCH 2011). LUCA & MODREGO (2021: 263) defined IMC as “a governance structure where municipalities collaborate with the goal of providing shared public goods/services without completely renouncing their decision-making powers”. It is therefore a strategy to increase the flexibility of planning within the formal framework, especially in comparison to municipal mergers (*ibid.*). The areas and forms of cooperation are diverse. They range, for example, from regional housing strategies to the joint designation of industrial zones, or from cultural cooperation to projects in the field of tourism or regional marketing. In addition, greater focus is being placed on process design, including in areas such as citizen services, purchasing, personnel services or information technology. Thus, especially for smaller municipalities, this strategy offers an alternative to municipal mergers or privatisation of parts of the public sector, while still increasing municipalities’ flexibility in dealing with common challenges (PORTZ & VON LOJEWSKI 2020, KUHLMANN & WOLLMANN 2013). However, LUCA & MODREGO (2021) showed that an increase of municipal efficiency through IMC is controversial.

Many IMC settings start as informal setups. These soft spaces can ‘harden’ over time, i.e. they become institutionalised by way of legal formalisation (ZIMMERBAUER & PAASI 2020). GÖRGL & GRUBER (2015) used the case study of Vienna to point out that cooperation has remained rather informal compared to cases of urban-rural cooperation in Germany. In the latter country, however, the level of ‘hardening’ varies from case to case. ZIMMERMANN (2017) showed that there was no standard legal form of organisation for these cases. Since the influence of case dependency is undeniable, the degree of formalisation is also influenced by different state legislation (KUHLMANN & WOLLMANN 2013: 158-159). The German *Länder* (federal states) are responsible for regional development. The prevalence of municipal

mergers vs. IMC varies accordingly. KUHLMANN & WOLLMANN have emphasised that the Federal State of Rhineland-Palatinate has particularly supported IMC (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the degree of formalisation of IMC projects in Rhineland-Palatinate has also varied depending on the case (FURKERT 2008, STEINEBACH et al. 2017).

### 3 The SKSL project

The Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and for Sports (Mdi) began supporting the establishment and development of IMC in two model areas in Rhineland-Palatinate in January 2018. The Zukunftsinitiative ‘Starke Kommunen – Starkes Land’ (the Strong Municipalities – Strong Federal State future initiative, hereinafter referred to as SKSL) was a project in its second cycle, which lasted for four years (2018–2021). It offered participating municipalities the opportunity to receive advisory and financial support in setting up structures to cooperate in various fields of action. The federal state government’s declared main goals were to explore ways to develop and implement IMC intensively and sustainably, and to fund municipal infrastructure in an efficient and coordinated way. The project’s first cycle from 2014 to 2016 focused on local municipality levels in six model areas, each consisting of two (in one case three) rural municipalities (STEINEBACH et al. 2017).

In the second cycle, the project was limited to two, relatively urban, model areas; one is considerably larger than the other (see Fig. 1). The municipalities of Bad Breisig, Bad Hönningen, Linz am Rhein, Unkel, Vallendar and Weißenthurm and the towns of Andernach, Bendorf, Neuwied, Remagen and Sinzig make up the ‘Mitten am Rhein’ (hereinafter referred to as MAR) *Städtenetz* (city network) in the north of Rhineland-Palatinate (MAR 2021, MDI 2021). This area comprises the area of both sides of the River Rhine between the two major cities of Bonn and Koblenz, and is home to some 250,000 inhabitants. The Rhine shapes the region and has an identity-forming effect, but it is also a physical obstacle that divides the model area and should not be underestimated. According to the current regional development plan, the LEP IV, the region is defined as a densely populated area with settlement structures ranging from dispersed to highly concentrated (STEINEBACH et al. 2017: 37, MDI 2008: 40). The regional development plan is a framework for the spatial development of Rhineland-Palatinate as well as

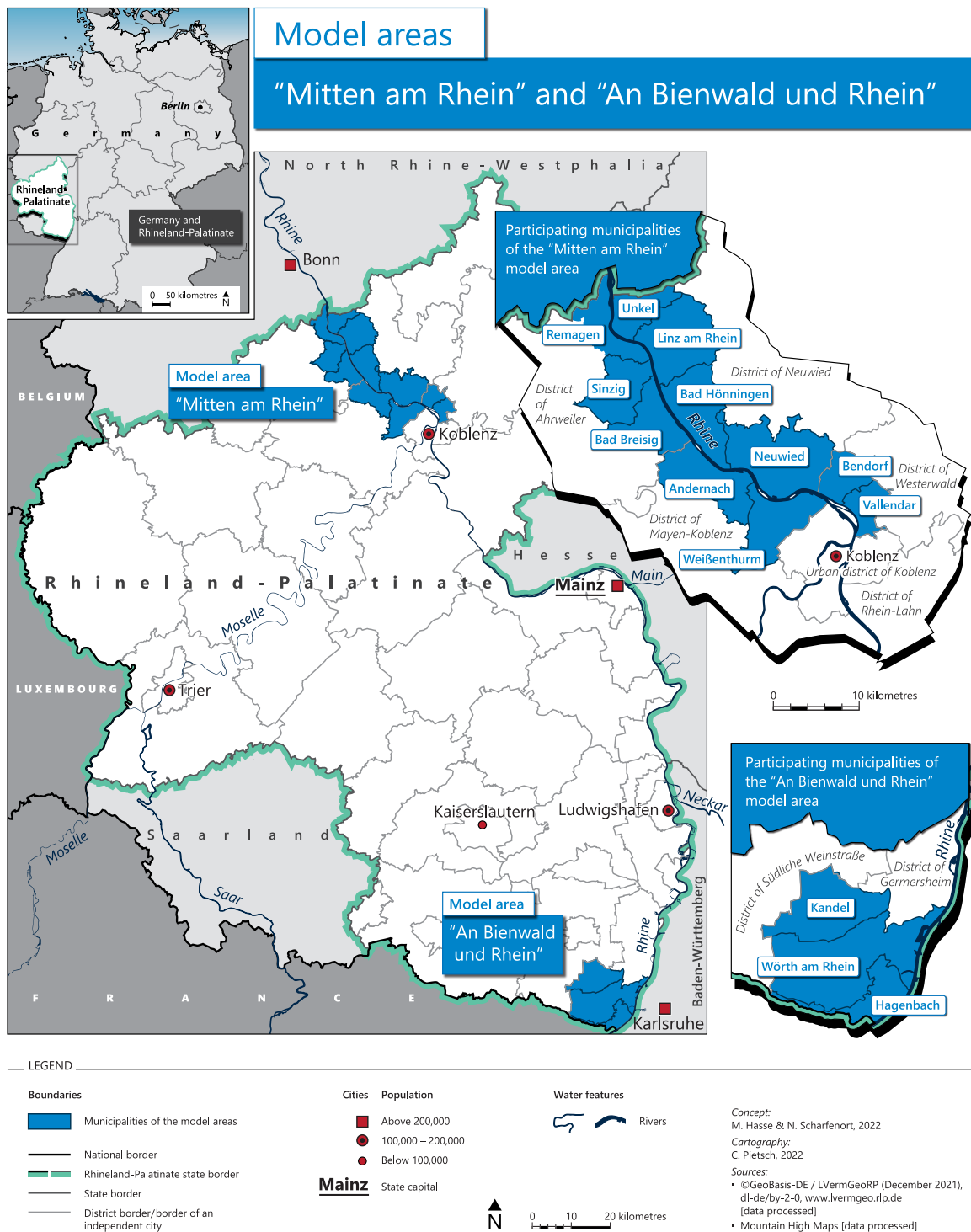


Fig. 1: Map of the SKSL project’s model areas within Rhineland-Palatinate

its subregions. It focuses on ensuring the provision of public services (*Daseinsvorsorge*) in spatial planning and settlement development (MbI 2022).

In the south of Rhineland-Palatinate, the *Stadt-Umland-Kooperation* (urban-rural cooperation project) in ‘An Bienwald und Rhein’ (hereinafter referred to

as ABUR) includes the municipalities of Kandel and Hagenbach as well as the town of Wörth am Rhein in the surrounding area of the Karlsruhe conurbation (Mdl 2021), with a population of approximately 44,000. According to the LEP IV, the model area is a densely populated area with a dispersed settlement structure in the Rhine-Neckar region (STEINEBACH et al. 2017: 29, Mdl 2008: 40). In MAR, the municipality of Bad Breisig is in charge of the project, whereas in ABUR, the leading municipality is Kandel. Together with Hagenbach, Kandel had already participated in the first cycle of SKSL.

The Mdl financed the entire expenditure during the project period (2018–2021), providing a total of more than EUR 2.2 million in funding. Part of the funding was used to provide direct support to local projects and structures; actors from both model areas sought to jointly initiate and consolidate structures and projects. They also determined areas of cooperation as well as the implementation processes. Another part of the funding was used to commission two specialist planning offices, one for each model area. The planning offices supported the model areas in matters concerning structural and project development. The goal was to allow projects and structures to grow by boosting their trust in partnership and in their own capacities, enabling these municipalities to overcome complex challenges in the future through collaboration (FREISBERG 2020). In addition, a project advisory board was set up to provide an overview of the relevant overlaps with other departments of the federal state government.

The dissimilarities between the two model areas clearly make a direct comparison difficult. While the differences in size are the most obvious disparities, the corresponding differences in planning structures, i.e. the network created by the project on which these structures rely, is of particular importance. In ABUR, the municipalities were able to rely on the structure that Hagenbach and Kandel had already established in the first cycle of SKSL. But even before that, their administrations were already familiar with each other because they belong to the same district, together with Wörth. The town was then seamlessly integrated into the existing network. In addition to this shared familiarity, *Stadt-Umland-Kooperation* was initiated to collaborate on specific issues, namely an inter-municipal awarding authority, an inter-municipally shared business park and a joint association office. From the beginning, the planning structure consisted of the three mayors along with the respective Head of the Mayor's Office and the aforementioned planning office, as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, the Mdl.

In MAR, however, the initial phase was quite different. Due to the size of the area, the first thing that occurred was the establishment of a coordination office. The municipalities' mayors took up the project, quickly creating a committee that was only composed of the mayors themselves, the coordination office and the Mdl. At the same time, another committee was created, consisting of the Heads of the Mayor's Office and/or the respective municipal contact person for SKSL. Both committees dealt with the search for areas of cooperation. A lot of time was initially invested in the search for areas of cooperation and the right structure. Just as the areas of cooperation were about to be agreed upon after about one-and-a-half to two years of project work, the second committee was dissolved. The result nevertheless consisted of a regional tourism development concept, a regional transport development concept and a plan to strengthen administrative structures in the region, including by increasingly digitalising them. This shows that the planning network in the northern model area is much larger and more complex, integrating various planning levels into the project's work. The initial phase was also characterised by meetings where the mayors of both model areas and the Mdl were present. Together with the consulting planning offices, they also formed a superordinate planning network.

While these differences make a direct comparison difficult, it is precisely these differences that highlight certain factors of networked cooperation. Levels of trust, familiarity, the number of actors, and common experiences on the work, for instance, all varied between the two networks. The influence of these characteristics on work relationships and network-building – and therefore on cooperation itself – became a key area of interest for the analysis and comparison of the two networks.

When the first lockdown measures to combat the pandemic were taken in Germany in March 2020, the priorities within the two model regions shifted drastically. The municipalities involved focused on pandemic control while still searching for ways to maintain day-to-day business, which brought the SKSL project to a halt – at least temporarily. The majority of administrative staff switched to working from home, although local administration agencies were caught by surprise and were therefore unable to immediately provide basic technical equipment such as laptop computers, cameras or headsets, not to mention software for remote working. The administrative work also relied on the staff's private internet access. There were similar problems throughout the

working world, including in planning and engineering offices, transport companies and the tourism associations collaborating on the SKSL project. It was not until late summer 2020 that the municipalities were able to resume the planning project.

#### 4 Methodological approach of this study

Three months after the start of the SKSL project, the Trier University was commissioned to scientifically evaluate and review the project about every six months throughout its duration (see Fig. 2). The results of the interim evaluations were analysed and classified according to the success of IMC (see BBSR 2018: 67–69, BMVBS 2008: 63–66, FRICK & HOKKELER 2008: 67–76, FURKERT 2008: 48). The factors used are best described in terms of network building and development, changes in cooperation, and project development. The criteria were examined and evaluated using primary data and secondary data from various documents, such as meeting minutes, videos, websites and newspaper reports. The primary data consisted of a semi-annual longitudinal study with online surveys, (participant) observations at events (after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, these observations were limited to telephone and video conferences) and qualitative stakeholder interviews.

Due to the interruption of the project due to the pandemic, it was necessary to adjust the evaluation in terms of time and criteria. In order to capture the impact of the pandemic on IMC, the qualitative interviews were supplemented with open-ended questions concerning particular challenges during the pandemic (BOGNER et al. 2009, FLICK 2012: 194–226, KVALE 2007: 37–40). Key questions focused on the structure and functioning of the networks, the impact of the pandemic on the project, and coping mechanisms. The role of face-to-face/informal communication was of particular interest. This article is based on data collected in the last two phases (see Fig. 2), during which particular attention was paid

to the pandemic by the researchers. The data from Phases 1 to 4 was taken into account to allow conclusions to be drawn about changes. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with 23 stakeholders in January (Phase 5) and August, September and October 2021 (Phase 6). The respondents include representatives from the MdI, the two planning offices, and the coordinating office, as well as mayors, the Heads of the Mayor's Office, municipal contact persons, and administrative staff from both model areas. An anonymised list of the interviewees can be found in table 1 in the appendix. All interviews were conducted in German; quotes used in this text have been translated to English.

Data collection was also impaired by the July 2021 floods (ADD 2021, BPB 2021). This event particularly affected the Ahr River, which flows into the Rhine in Sinzig. Fortunately, Sinzig was not as badly affected as many other municipalities upstream along the Ahr River were. Nevertheless, the MdI subsequently prohibited any enquiries with stakeholders, as the focus within Rhineland-Palatinate and the District of Ahrweiler shifted entirely to disaster relief. As a result, the municipalities from the District of Ahrweiler are underrepresented in the survey.

#### 5 Work relationships, informal planning and the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on SKSL's planning networks, and highlighted the importance of informality in the process of managing the pandemic. As described in the theory chapter of this article, informality is always case-specific (VAN ASSCHE et al. 2018: 226). Since the results are based on this understanding, this section will first explore this case-specific informality. Next, the paper shows how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the inter-municipal project after March 2020. This section concludes with the impact of the pandemic on cooperation.

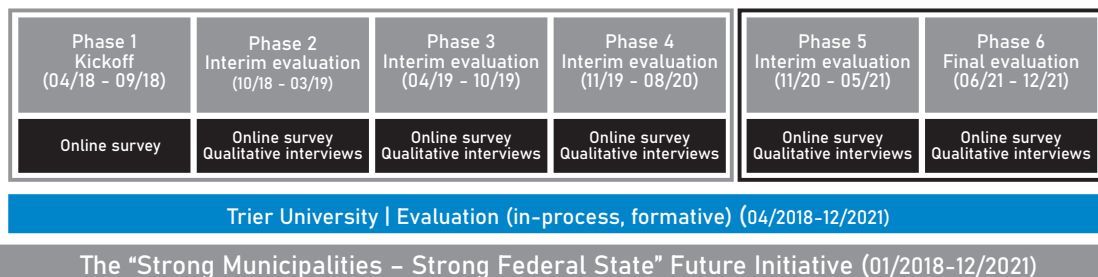


Fig. 2: Assessment of progress, potential, obstacles/challenges, results and transfer potential during the process

### 5.1 Understanding case-dependent informality

In the case of the SKSL project, informality arises in both legal and organisational contexts. Both of the project's model areas are soft spaces in the process of hardening, yet not fully covered by formal rules (ALTROCK 2016: 175, ZIMMERBAUER & PAASI 2020). Formality and informality are thus entangled (ALTROCK 2016, VAN ASSCHE et al. 2018). The informal is largely 'invisible' at first glance, similar to how INNES et al. (2007: 198) described it. In both model areas, the project has been structured around centralised committees with clearly documented working methods. These committees are not yet legally formalised, but they are the formal structure that the networks have agreed upon. On the one hand, communication about how to proceed has taken place within these committees; on the other hand, formal, official channels are followed outside the committees, either down to the municipal administrations or up to the MdI. In addition to these formal structures, however, another essential part of the project work happens at the level of personal communication. This type of communication has taken place in two different settings. First, it happens in face-to-face conversations before, during or after official meetings. SKSL-related communication is not merely restricted to SKSL meetings, however. Mayors – who represent their municipality at official meetings at the district level, at meetings of their LEADER<sup>1)</sup> regions and at meetings of their respective political parties – have been particularly involved in SKSL communication outside these structures. Other municipal stakeholders have also discussed SKSL in such forums, albeit to a lesser extent. Second, personal communication has also often taken place via telephone calls, as all participants noted. Some also emphasised the increasing importance of social media. These two types of personal communication with the project partners were described as an indefinable mix, including small talk, exchanging personal information, clarifying project-related information or discussing other issues. Interestingly, some interviewees stated that ideas from SKSL meetings were also discussed. In some cases, discussions even revolved around further strategic action. The following quote summarises this phenomenon by also highlighting the problem of clearly distinguishing between these strands of communication:

<sup>1)</sup> LEADER is a programme of the European Union that also funds inter-municipal projects. Municipalities in both model areas are also involved in LEADER regions (REGION RHEIN-WIED 2021, REGION SÜDPFALZ 2021).

“Let's take this [tourism] project for example. You have to discuss how to do it, how to evaluate it. How do you do these or those things? We don't necessarily only talk about the SKSL projects during the break, but also about other things. Then, strategies are made. The policy is made. And the next day we sit down together again. But this discussion does not end at 4 pm, 5 pm, 6 pm. It simply continues after the meeting. So, yes, I also believe that strategies have been developed that way.”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, September 2021*

Another respondent noted how small talk became a discussion about strategy:

“Ideas are actually already being spun there. Yes. For example, your colleague doesn't know how to set up this housing association, but knows that we already have one. The first question is, what's the best way to do it? Then we get the Head of my office, make an appointment, done. You don't do that if you don't know each other well enough. And these are opportunities where you can simply talk about something like that.”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, September 2021*

The important aspect of trust will be further discussed below. It is sufficient at this point to note how crucial trust was according to this respondent. The only relatively clear difference between telephone and face-to-face communication that emerged is that telephone conversations were used almost exclusively to obtain specific information. In comparison, face-to-face communication covered a wide range of issues, from small talk to personal information to project details. Interestingly, interviewees used terms such as 'coffee-break chats', 'water cooler chats' or simply 'personal chats' when referring to this kind of communication. However, when asked to define what they meant by informal or formal, the answers mostly corresponded to this description:

“Formal cooperation somehow means that you have to go through the official channels first. You have to coordinate everything with the office, and then it gets passed on again. I think the great thing about the whole project is – of course – that cooperation also works without it.”

*Municipal Project Manager in the Mitten am Rhein area, August 2021*

“Informally means – and I have no problem with the structure at all – for me it means that if I want to clarify the situation or something similar, I simply call our partners. We quickly talk and exchange ideas.”

*Head of the Mayor's Office in the Mitten am Rhein area, August 2021*

In most cases, however, interviewees only called this type of communication ‘informal’ when confronted with the word. During the interviews, personal communication therefore frequently came to be equated to informality because it took place outside of formal committees or the official chain of communication. With regard to these informal channels, one of the accompanying planners stressed that “some of the most successful projects work on an informal basis.” When confronted with this statement in a second interview, the respondent clarified the statement by adding, “obviously, projects need a formal backbone, a formal structure, which can then be filled with ‘informal life.’” This understanding is clearly reminiscent of the hybrid formal-informal arrangements described by ALTROCK (2016: 179–181). In this case, then, informality exists within the formal. It is composed of the fine lines that support and bind the still-formalising structure. For SKSL, formality means communication within official committees and through official channels. Informality, in contrast, is any exchange that takes place outside of these documented structures.

## 5.2 SKSL during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting control measures almost completely paralysed the SKSL project from March 2020 to September 2020. Municipalities rushed to enable their personnel to set up home offices,<sup>2)</sup> while drafting and implementing pandemic control measures at the same time. This encompassed challenges of both a ‘hard’ and of a ‘soft’ nature. ‘Hard’ challenges concerned the provision of technical infrastructure, both hardware and software, to enable remote working in the first place. At that time, the media all over Germany reported on a digitalisation process that was set in motion by

<sup>2)</sup> Of course, this only refers to the occupational groups for whom remote working was possible. Municipal employees also include police or administrative employees whose work simply could not be carried out remotely. For reasons of space, we have omitted this aspect.

the pandemic. In the interviews, this was also attributed exclusively to the pandemic. In addition, people had to acclimate themselves to the pandemic and to the new working environment, which became inseparable from their personal lives and thus represented a ‘soft’ challenge.

A prime example of this was provided by a mayor from the MAR region. When he was elected in 2017, he convened a working group to facilitate working from home in his municipality. In 2019, the working group predicted that 15 people would be able to work from home by summer 2020. Due to the pandemic, this ballooned to 270 by May 2020. Companies that collaborated on IMC projects faced similar challenges. However, they were able to support working from home more quickly. One exception was the planning office working in ABUR, which had already had experience with remote working. This allowed SKSL meetings in ABUR to start back up in the digital space more quickly, but the shift in priorities still slowed the project down. Variation in technical capacities as well as the differing levels of experience in using it further amplified the unevenness between the two model areas.

Remote working dominated the project and most municipal work until approximately May 2021, when the first restrictions were eased. Shortly after that, in summer 2021, meetings began to be held in person again. However, a hybrid work mode continued even then, with some people joining these meetings only digitally. The vast majority of respondents predicted that this hybrid work mode would remain, simply because of the time savings it allowed. Nevertheless, many respondents also emphasised their preference for face-to-face meetings:

“If you are in a face-to-face event, then there may be water cooler discussions before the meeting and after the meeting, where some topics can also come up again. These topics may then be taken up again later on. And this is exactly what gets lost in a video conference.”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, August 2021*

“This leads to the fact that today, before we make a phone call with two or three people, we quickly connect via video. It’s quite uncomplicated. And of course it helps sometimes, at least in my personal opinion, to simply look each other in the eye. In any case, it’s better than just talking to each other on the phone. But it doesn’t replace a face-to-face exchange. I think that if you only meet four



times a year anyway, it makes sense to meet in person, because the conversations that take place on the side in such a setting are far from insignificant.”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, August 2021*

The advantage of saving time was again mentioned above all when busy schedules prevented personal attendance. This is in line with another important point that was repeatedly voiced in the interviews as well as in the online survey: only during the pandemic did the partners realise the relevance of the personal level of communication – personal interaction and communication were essential for cooperation. When participants were only able to communicate through digital means, the telephone and social media, the importance of face-to-face/informal communication became far clearer.

### 5.3 A disrupted cooperation

Even though the SKSL project was disrupted at the beginning of the pandemic, it is important to note that its participants did not stop working. This was possible because the planning networks of both model areas remained active throughout. At the beginning, when most people involved in the project were still unfamiliar with lockdown measures, even the MdI could not provide sufficient guidance on how to proceed or cope with this situation – it was also new to them. The informal channels of communication were therefore activated, and both municipal staff and mayors contacted their inter-municipal counterparts to obtain strategic information about how to handle the situation:

“Yes, of course we were in exchange. We talked about questions like ‘how do you deal with the pandemic? How are you dealing with it in your administration?’ There are labour law issues. But then you also have the possibility to call the colleague [from another municipality] – who you now know [because of IMC] and ask, ‘How do you do it?’ So that’s where this network creation comes into play again. You use it under these circumstances.”

*Head of the Mayor’s Office in the Mitten am Rhein area, August 2021*

Although informal channels were used in both model areas, the extent they were used was very different. Overall, in ABUR, the pandemic affected

cooperation much less than in MAR. In ABUR, the shift in priorities also led to the project being halted for the first few months. Thanks to the existing technical infrastructure and the associated experience of the corresponding planning office, however, ABUR was able to resume its committee work without any hiccups. Of crucial importance, however, is that only three mayors had to be brought together, who then passed on information to their respective municipalities. There, the situation differed again, as only one municipality had fully enabled remote working by early spring of 2021.

In the much larger model area of MAR, coronavirus-related disruptions had a more complex effect than in ABUR. While the first few months were similar, it took longer for the project to be resumed. The municipalities required different amounts of time to enable remote working, which was clearly related to the different sizes of the municipalities. For example, some municipalities consist of a few villages and small towns with approximately 12,000 inhabitants in total, whereas the largest municipality is the town of Neuwied, with some 65,000 inhabitants. These differences in size resulted in correspondingly different financial and personnel capacities to cope with the project’s tasks. Furthermore, the planning network itself was responsible for enabling the continuation of the committee work, as its coordination office was performing the same tasks as the planning office in ABUR. Although the coordination office is located in a geographically central municipality, its smaller size made it more difficult to set up the necessary technical infrastructure on the one hand; on the other hand, the logistical effort of bringing together mayors from eleven municipalities that themselves were in crisis management mode was also a greater challenge.

Three of the mayors were also replaced during the pandemic through elections; in addition to dealing with the crisis, they first had to settle into the planning network and familiarise themselves with the SKSL project. However, this was seen as less of a problem, as the other mayors were very welcoming of the newcomers and helped them to settle in quickly. As the evaluation of the interviews showed, this was made possible by a network whose members both appreciated and trusted each other even outside the context of the shared project. Interestingly, the importance of informal channels was highlighted in the interviews, although the focus of their use varied. For example, those who were newcomers emphasised the use of informal channels to obtain information on SKSL, whereas those who had been

involved in the project from the beginning emphasised that they had shared information on how to deal with the pandemic.

Trust among the project partners was therefore a central prerequisite for the planning network's success. Trust was described by one interview partner as follows:

“These personal experiences are extremely important. To know whom I can ask, who has seen or done this before and has strengths or weaknesses in that matter. It's important to know where I can support someone, where I can help out. Sometimes the professional conversation becomes private. On a basis of trust. That is very important. To trust each other. To say ‘that's who I can trust.’”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, September 2021*

Comparing the two model areas, ABUR was clearly in an advantageous position at the beginning of the project, with participants having already established both trust and familiarity with each other. In MAR, the initial phase was characterised by trust building *and* project work. While discussing this with respondents from both model areas, the majority valued the team-building events at the start of the project. One mayor from the MAR area repeatedly emphasised that, in retrospect, these events became increasingly important:

“It means that at the beginning of the project phase, these repeated meetings were seen negatively by every mayor, because you were wasting time again. But when you look at it now, it was a very important investment. This time was well invested in getting to know each other, and it will also be long-lasting.”

*Mayor in the Mitten am Rhein area, September 2021*

At this point, it is important to mention that this trust grew steadily throughout the project. This investment of time led to trust becoming an important resource for the networks, a resource that can only be used *informally*. It was then harnessed during the pandemic to keep the network operational – both for project-related issues and beyond.

## 6 Discussion

Analysing the planning network(s) of the SKSL project by drawing on case-related planning litera-

ture (ALTROCK 2016, BODE & WILHELM 2014, VAN ASSCHE et al. 2018), the network(s) can neither be categorised as distinctively formal nor informal. Rather, the setup that is encountered is itself a mix of informal and formal. This is consistent with SCHRÖDER & WAIBEL'S (2015: 102) statement that no political system functions solely through formal structures, but that decisions are always made both formally and informally. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between these categories (ibid.). The same applies to a certain extent when determining the role of informal channels in dealing with the pandemic. The previous section, however, showed that functionality can be ensured in particular by using informality as a resource.

It is interesting to reconsider the LEADER project at this point. Since some municipalities are part of LEADER regions, which extend beyond SKSL's model areas, interviewees stressed that experiences with LEADER helped in setting up SKSL's planning network. This was due to the personal informal connections some of the project partners already had and the experiences from there. Furthermore, the interviewees repeatedly mixed the two projects in the interviews, since both promote the idea of inter-municipality. This is reminiscent of what VAN STRAALLEN & WITTE (2018) called *fuzzy governance*, where different formal and informal scalar governance constructs overlap. Similarly, participation in SKSL has encouraged municipalities to apply to become LEADER regions as well. Participation in both inter-municipal projects was thus strongly promoted by personal communication, i.e. informality. In turn, it further strengthened the informal within the formal. Forming new planning networks through informal channels is a strategic use of informality as planning strategy, similar to how ROY (2005) or INNES et al. (2007) described it. Paired with informal conversations at formal meetings or spontaneous telephone calls to obtain information, the members of the SKSL planning network(s) also strategically use informality, although, in most cases, they do it somewhat unconsciously.

After the July 2021 Ahr River flood disaster, which devastated municipalities including the SKSL-participant town of Sinzig, “inter-municipal solidarity” (as interviewees referred to it) followed. An official of the town described how MAR's planning network was quickly activated, leading mayors of neighbouring municipalities to support Sinzig not only financially, but above all with staff and infrastructure facilities. This alone was not significant for the neighbouring municipalities. However,

other MAR municipalities, which had no pre-SKSL connections to Sinzig, joined these aid efforts, or started some themselves. This was mainly due to their new personal relationships with people of the affected town. The time invested in trust-building, ideas exchanged in ‘coffee break conversations’ and help concerning a technical question subsequently made the aid a personal concern.

The examples given above paint a picture depicting the people of the SKSL planning network(s) with their trust-based (informal) means of communication as the backbone of cooperation. The inter-municipal planning project relies on these informal components of the planning network(s) in the event of disruptions. SCHRÖDER & WAIBEL (2015: 97) stated that “informality as a mode is increasingly used as a tool of flexibility, testing, and learning”; this corresponds with HEALEY (2009), who understood planning, in general, as a practically situated, social learning activity. This not only further challenges a clear distinction between formality and informality; it emphasises informality as an integral part of formal planning.

In the case of SKSL, the informal/formal link makes it difficult to determine the exact role that formal or informal structures played in keeping the planning network(s) functioning while disrupted. However, the importance of informal communication in this matter is undeniable. These informal strands served to provide information as a matter of course. Informal communication inevitably and continuously built the network(s), i.e. it hardened these *soft spaces*. Finally, yet importantly, the network(s) also used informality as planning strategy as well, so their use in crisis management is obvious.

## 7 Conclusion

This article examined an inter-municipal planning project in Germany and analysed some of the main impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the project, i.e. on its actors and the relationships that link the project. Ultimately, the project’s two model areas faced various challenges; some were the same, some were different. Although the differences between these two model areas had already been evident before the pandemic, this disruption highlighted them even more. Furthermore, the dissimilar conditions of and within these two geographical areas, including in their technical infrastructure, led to different ways of managing the pandemic. The

regional differences within Germany or its federal states are nothing new, but also a reason why the MdI launched SKSL. The crisis’s disparate impact on such a small scale further illustrated these differences. The networking process of the participating municipalities ultimately played a particularly prominent role in crisis management. The networks’ formalising, stable characteristics as well as the informal structures within and alongside the formal ones both played a role. The trust-based, informal channels were particularly important when the official communication channels themselves were disrupted or unable to provide information at the beginning of the pandemic. Although the data indicates that this was particularly true for MAR, informal channels were activated to some extent in both model areas to manage the disruption. The varying need of exchange for crisis management further illustrates the pandemic’s varied effects on the two model areas. The project’s network(s) thus proved to be its backbone, with its informal/formal nature helping to keep the project functioning. The stability of the(se) network(s) was strengthened through team-building workshops at the beginning of the project, as repeatedly stressed by several participants. This highlights the significance that team-building and trust-building have in developing resilient projects. Since the pandemic increasingly revealed the importance of personal communication to the stakeholders, it can be expected that they will pay more attention to it in future cooperation. Furthermore, it is likely that the project stakeholders will pay more attention to team-building and trust-building when working in other settings as well.

As a bridge between regional and local planning, the case of SKSL can contribute to the discussion about inter-municipal cooperation, soft spaces and informality in planning. First, this case study points to an understanding of informality that is not necessarily a deviation from the formal. Since both IMC and soft spaces are rather unconventional planning concepts, their informal character still needs formal foundations. Similarly, this case demonstrates how state-led planning is strongly entangled in informal structures; although the state determines the level of formality, it is not always completely formal. Secondly, in the case of SKSL, the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that a formal planning system in a state of acute disruption can be kept functional through its inherent informal structures. Observing informal structures and their potential to manage crises is therefore an interesting objective for future research.

## Acknowledgements

This article draws on data collected as part of an evaluative project conducted by the authors on behalf of the Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and for Sports, Germany. We would especially like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the extensive feedback we received on an earlier version of this article.

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## Appendix

**Tab. 1: List of interviews with the general function and institutional affiliation of the interview respondents**

Month	Function	Affiliation
01/2021	Private planner	Private planning office consulting for <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
01/2021	Project manager	Coordinating office in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
01/2021	Private planner	Private planning office consulting for <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
01/2021	Project initiators and coordinators	Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and for Sports
08/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Head of the Mayor's Office	Municipality in <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
08/2021	Private planner	Private planning office consulting for <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
08/2021	Head of the Mayor's Office	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Project manager	Coordinating office in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Private planner	Private planning office consulting for <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Municipal project manager	Municipal tourist agency, <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Administrative employee	Municipal awarding authority, <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
08/2021	Head of the Mayor's Office	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
08/2021	Administrative employee	Municipal awarding authority, <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
08/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
08/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
09/2021	Municipal project manager	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
09/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
09/2021	Project evaluator	Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and for Sports
09/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
09/2021	Mayor and Head of the Mayor's Office	Municipality in <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
09/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
09/2021	Mayor	Municipality in <i>Mitten am Rhein</i>
09/2021	Private planner	Private planning office consulting for <i>An Bienwald und Rhein</i>
10/2021	Project initiators and coordinators	Rhineland-Palatinate Ministry of the Interior and for Sports

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