

DISREGARDED

STRUCTURALLY WEAK BUT RICH IN EXPERIENCE

Regional perspectives and their significance for the Great Transformation

When tackling the great challenges of the future, such as the climate crisis and demographic change, many people in structurally weak regions feel disregarded. **This is the conclusion reached by a unique study that seeks to develop a better understanding of people's perception of the socio-ecological transformation (referred to as the Great Transformation in this study) and how to shape it politically in a just and sustainable way. Over 200 doorstep conversations conducted in four German regions¹ highlight how people in structurally weak areas view the future of the country and of their region, as well as their own future.** One key finding is that people consider themselves to be affected by change, but without a say in tackling it. Building on respondents' own accounts the study maps three patterns of interpretation and develops specific recommendations for action, aimed at harnessing the potential of structurally weak areas in a period of transformation.

THE STUDY IN FIGURES

OPEN
QUESTIONS
10

CITIES AND
MUNICIPALITIES VISITED
17

DOORSTEP
CONVERSATIONS
217

DOORSTEP
VISITS CA.
3.500

NUMBER OF WORDS
IN THE DATA SET CA.
80.000

MAIN FINDINGS

A systematic content analysis of the doorstep conversations enabled us to work out three distinct patterns of interpretation. They are characterised by substantive contradictions. The main point is that people regard themselves as affected by rather than as active participants in the Great Transformation.

THE PRESENT: THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A PROBLEM, BUT OUR SOCIAL PROBLEMS ARE MORE URGENT. A large proportion of respondents consider climate protection to be one of the most important collective challenges, though less important than social justice. That does not mean, however, that it has high priority in an everyday context. Here, people are mainly concerned with improvements in public infrastructure and a revitalisation of local cultural and leisure facilities.

THE FUTURE: I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT MY FUTURE, BUT ABOUT THE REGION. While people show a certain resilience about their worries for their own future, they are concerned about their regions. People aren't really afraid that the place they live in *could* be left behind, sometime or other, but rather that it will *continue* to be left behind in the future.

"We should make the major policy areas, actually all of them, more socially responsible. And the fact that climate policy can actually be socially compatible needs to be better communicated."

- WOMAN [AGE 25] FROM GREPPIN

THE PROCESS: OUR DEMOCRACY IS STRONG, BUT THOSE AT THE TOP ARE ALL USELESS. The majority of respondents expressed general trust in democracy's ability to cope with transformation. At the same time, however, there was a marked scepticism concerning their elected decision-makers. But beneath the frustration there are often quite specific concerns, including politicians' lack of empathy and distance from their constituents, and a sense that respondents have been politically abandoned.

¹ Bitterfeld-Wolfen, Duisburg und Bochum, Saarbrücken region and Western Pomerania-Greifswald.

POLICY CONCLUSIONS

The Great Transformation entails far-reaching changes in all regions. To try to ensure majority support and acceptance, as well as to reinforce social cohesion, the fight against regional disparities is high on the political agenda. A key finding of the study when fostering equal living conditions is that the regions in question, although structurally weak – because of past transformations – are also rich in experience. **Having said that, most respondents regard themselves as people affected by change, but not as actors with a say in shaping it.** Furthermore, although the areas in which intensive economic and social changes are looming are central sites of structural transformation, they are rarely considered to be active, strategic partners in political efforts to tackle the Great Transformation successfully.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The Progressive Zentrum in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung conducted 217 guided interviews in four structurally weak regions of Germany. The doorstep conversations took place in both urban and rural regions, in both eastern and western Germany. The aim was to get a handle on people's personal priorities in structurally weak regions, their views and the patterns of interpretation of change they gave rise to. The study was underpinned by an intensive research strategy. To that end, we questioned a group of people who are often talked about in the public debate, but whose voices are seldom heard. The respondents answered open questions about their views on the future from a national, regional and personal standpoint (such as *"What do you think will be Germany's greatest future challenges?"*; *"When you think about [survey location], what would you say makes you worried about the future?"*; *"If you could choose anything, what would be your most important wish for your own future?"*).

The study offers three recommendations on how residents of structurally weak areas can be brought on board in shaping the future. Provide **money** (public investments in the local energy economy and climate-friendly measures in everyday life); give people **the ability to set the agenda** (broad participation in thinking ahead and getting involved); and give them **voice** (direct opportunities for discussion or consultative "future councils" that bring people's valuable experiences and knowledge into the process). These measures can be harnessed to win back trust in democracy and the state and help to accelerate the creation of equal living conditions.

In addition, people were asked about their trust in politics and the system of government (for example, *"Do you think that our democracy is generally capable of coping with economic and social change?"*). This open approach made it possible to engage with people's self-selected priorities and viewpoints in structurally weak regions and to derive distinct patterns of interpretation from it. The findings are very revealing as regards the political and economic debate on the "social dimension" of the Great Transformation. They represent a qualitative addition to fully standardised, sample-based opinion surveys.

The project follows on from the contents and methodology of the study **"Return to the politically abandoned"** conducted in 2017, which investigated right-wing populist strongholds in France and Germany.

More information about the project and the study can be found at:
www.progressives-zentrum.org/disregarded/?lang=en

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ORGANISATIONS

Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent progress- and innovation-oriented think tank based in Berlin.

www.progressives-zentrum.org

The **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung** is Germany's oldest political foundation. It campaigns for the core ideas and values of social democracy: freedom, justice and solidarity.

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