

DIGITAL NOMADS AS ENGINES FOR RURAL REVITALIZATION: THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF PÉCSDEVECSEK, HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the potential of digital nomads to act as engines for village rehabilitation. With the rise of remote work and the increasing accessibility of digital technologies a new generation of workers was born known as digital nomads who can work from anywhere in the world. While digital nomads have traditionally favored urban areas, there is a growing interest in rural areas as well.

This paper identifies the benefits that digital nomads can bring to rural areas, including the potential to stimulate local economies and bring new sources of income to rural communities. However, the paper also acknowledges the challenges that digital nomads can present, such as technological needs, appropriate housing and infrastructure.

The research also includes a Rural Development Strategy as a case study for an upcoming initiative aimed at creating a digital nomad hub in a small Hungarian village situated within the rural area of Baranya County.

KEYWORDS _ *digital nomads, rural innovation, community engagement*

INTRODUCTION

There is limited academic research available on the role of digital nomads in rural development. In Hungary, there are very few examples of coworking spaces in rural areas. As such, the study overviews the current state of rural coworking in Europe, the effect of digital nomads on rural settlements and it includes a case study of a rural development strategy for an upcoming project to establish a digital nomad center in a small Hungarian village in a rural region of Baranya County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital nomads are a growing population of mobile workers who are not tied to physical location and can work from anywhere with proper internet connection. There is a growing number of coliving and coworking spaces that cater to digital nomads. These spaces provide a collaborative environment for nomads to work together and share ideas, while also connecting with the local community through events and activities.

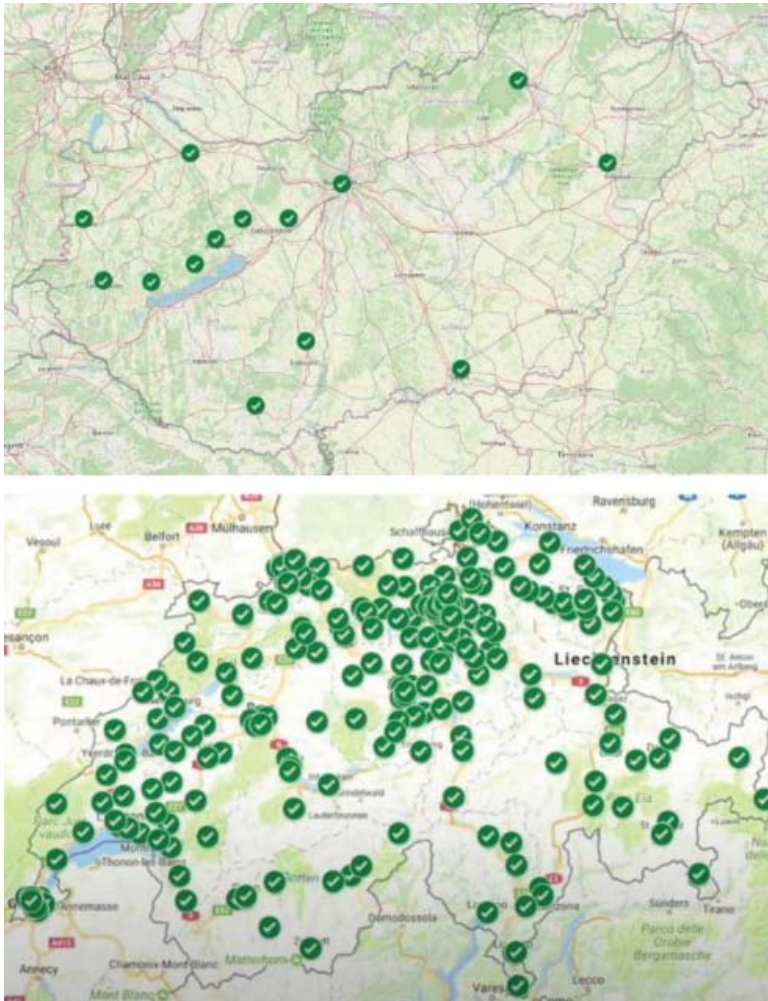


Figure 1: Coworking places in Hungary; **Figure 2:** Coworking places in Switzerland

THE RURAL CO-WORKING SCENE IN EUROPE

Digital nomads are often associated with urban environments and urban co-working spaces, but there is a growing trend for digital nomads to seek out rural areas for a different work-life balance (Hannonen, 2020). Rural work is becoming more prominent as a result of the digital transformation and then the Covid 19 pandemic (Nagel, 2020).

The importance of rural co-working spaces is increasingly recognized worldwide as an integral part of the community. Several European initiatives are developing, EU has a complex strategy for rural revitalization, where digital developments are in a central position (EU, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas by 2040). While the number of ongoing case studies is limited, but it can be assumed that remote work will become widely available worldwide over the years, leading to the emergence of many innovative collaborations in the future.

The rural coworking scene is developing in very different ways across Europe. (BertelsmannStiftung, 2021). Some countries are more developed (such as Germany, Switzerland, Italy, but also Norway), than countries where the scene has not yet developed, such as the Czech Republic or Hungary.

NEW PLACES OF WORK

With the development of rural coworking areas, new type of coworking spaces have also emerged. The BertelsmannStiftung's 2020 survey refers to a new emerging coworking model called New Village Centres and gives the following definition: "Multifunctional places like New Village Centres are standing for flexible use concepts in villages and communities. They are meeting places, marketplaces, and event spaces with promising synergies for coworking spaces. Coworking acts here as a unifying element of different actors, ideas, and goals to be achieved."

New Village Centers are examples of the transformative power that coworking spaces can have in rural areas, if they are thought of not just as isolated workplaces but as new centers of life. There are already examples of well-functioning New Village Centers in Germany, Norway, Switzerland and other countries.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL NOMADS FOR SETTLEMENTS

The arrival of digital nomads can affect the economies of villages and regions in many ways. Opening rural villages to foreign digital nomads has many benefits for both the local community and the nomads. Many rural areas are facing depopulation and economic decline. The creation of rural co-working spaces and the resulting opportunities for mobile working are attracting people back to peripheral rural areas and the first stimulating effects are already being felt. (Rural Coworking in Europe: Status Quo, as far as we Know, 2021) It implicates reduction in commuter traffic and associated transport emissions and avoidable health stress (Sutton-Parker, 2021). Establishing coworking places also stimulates the local economy by newcomers buying local goods and services but also because people stay local as consumers of local goods and services (Wang et a. 2019). The arrival of digital nomads can bring fresh inputs and energy to these areas, helping to rehabilitate them, support entrepreneurship and new economic activities. It can foster cultural exchange and understanding and promote social cohesion (Howell, 2022).

The trend of digital nomads in rural areas is accompanied by a number of challenges. One of these challenges is the strain on local infrastructure, as rural areas do not always have the infrastructure (including housing, transport and public services) to support a growing population. (Donnges & Foley, 2003) In terms of economic impact, digital nomads can contribute to local economies, but this impact may be limited if they are only in a place for a short period of time. (Kremkau, Schmied, Voll, 2021) Digital nomads can also contribute to the growth of the gig economy, as they often rely on short-term

contracts and freelance work. (J Woodcock, M Graham, 2019). However, rural digital nomads have been observed to stay in one place longer than urban digital nomads. Careful management of these challenges is essential to ensure that the benefits of digital nomads outweigh the negative impacts, especially adaption to accommodate digital nomads while preserving their unique identity and sense of community.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In Hungary the coworking scene should be considered underdeveloped, especially in rural areas. Most of the coworking scene is located in big cities. There are very few examples of coworking spaces in rural areas, and especially none that are decisive from the point of view of village development. It is not known whether places like the New Village Centers already exist in Hungary.

The primary objectives of the research is to explore the potential of digital nomads as a catalyst for rural development, to analyze the benefits and challenges of the phenomenon and to create a new Rural Development Model in Pécsdevecser.

METHODOLOGY

The research was preceded by an examination of the region and the village, as well as the possible collaborations with the village community, in addition to a comprehensive analysis based on the co-working and co-living literature, covering both domestic and international aspects. A SWOT analysis was also conducted on the existing eco-farm to reveal the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Based on these factors, the development strategy and an architectural concept plan of the area was prepared.

CASE DESCRIPTION - THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF PÉCSDEVECSE

Locational Background

Pécsdevecser is a tiny Swabian village just over 20 km from Pécs in the direction of Villány. Today, barely 100 people live in the settlement. Based on the 2011 census data, the Swabian identity is still significant, as 33% of the population declared themselves to be of German nationality. Even though it is close to Pécs, as it can be reached in 25 minutes by car, it remains a quiet settlement, far from the noise of the world. In terms of tourism, the settlement has a fortunate location, as Pécs, Villány, Siklós and Harkány can be reached within 25-30 minutes. There is a popular fishing lake not far north of the village. The area is ideal for cycling, as in addition to the low-traffic country roads, there are also many well-traveled agricultural dirt roads that provide access to the surrounding settlements.

In the center of the village, an existing ecofarm is located which is the site of the project. The ecofarm was established in 2021. Operates with chemical-free, cultivation-based permaculture principles.

Problem Statement and Proposal

Rural development opportunities are based on emerging alternatives that they can draw on and leverage effectively based on their own strengths and weaknesses. As each rural area is different, the appropriate exploitation of emerging development alternatives may also differ. Proper exploitation will result in the elimination of gaps and the development of strengths, thus presenting a range of scenarios that promise a future for rural economies.



Figure 3: The project site

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Wonderful countryside setting	External start-up capital is needed to renovate the buildings.	A growing number of teleworkers in Hungary and worldwide	Economic crisis
Unique product range	There are no service providers in the village.	Growing interest in rural areas	Inflation in Hungary
Flexible use of available space	Few suitable local workers for auxiliary work.	Application opportunities through European programs	Increase in transport prices
Many tourist attractions (Pécs, Villány wine region)	Pécsdevecser is far from the international airport.		Possible new pandemic crises
Access to the organic vegetable garden and a farm restaurant			
Access to various services on request (workshops, yoga, bike rental, wine tasting, etc.)			

Figure 4: SWOT analysis

Pécsdevecser is facing low population density which equals in lack of jobs, and prevents the villagers from having access to a full range of services; and the distance from Pécs combined with the poor mobility services also prevents people from taking advantage of the services available in the urban center. Establishing a coworking house in the rural area can compensate for the distance from the urban center, because work in digital space reduces the role of physical space. Two distinct target groups emerge as the focus of the Pécsdevecser project: addressing digital nomads who are looking for a balance between work and lifestyle and to engage local professionals who are looking for flexible workspace and networking opportunities.

EU's initiative for rural areas (EU, A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas by 2040) include: the use of new information and communication technology – to reduce the relevance of space; well-established bio-industry and the activation of ecosystem services – to protect, enrich and enhance the environment for tourism. The combination of the existing ecofarm with the co-working is an approach that incorporates these 3 principles into its strategy. The digital nomad center can become a space that provides and connects.

Development model of Pécsdevecser

On the design site are located 2 Swabian residential buildings built in 1940, a barn and several farm buildings. The architectural concept plan is utilizing the vacant buildings, and fills them up with the coworking and coliving functions. At the center of the structural model stands the symbiosis of the farm and co-working place, and this base is complemented by various other services. Additional services are such as outside workplaces, community greenhouse, small restaurant and café, gym, market place, event space and community areas. By creatively utilizing the features and buildings, it creates a rural, authentic environment by providing services that are attractive to both domestic and international target audiences.

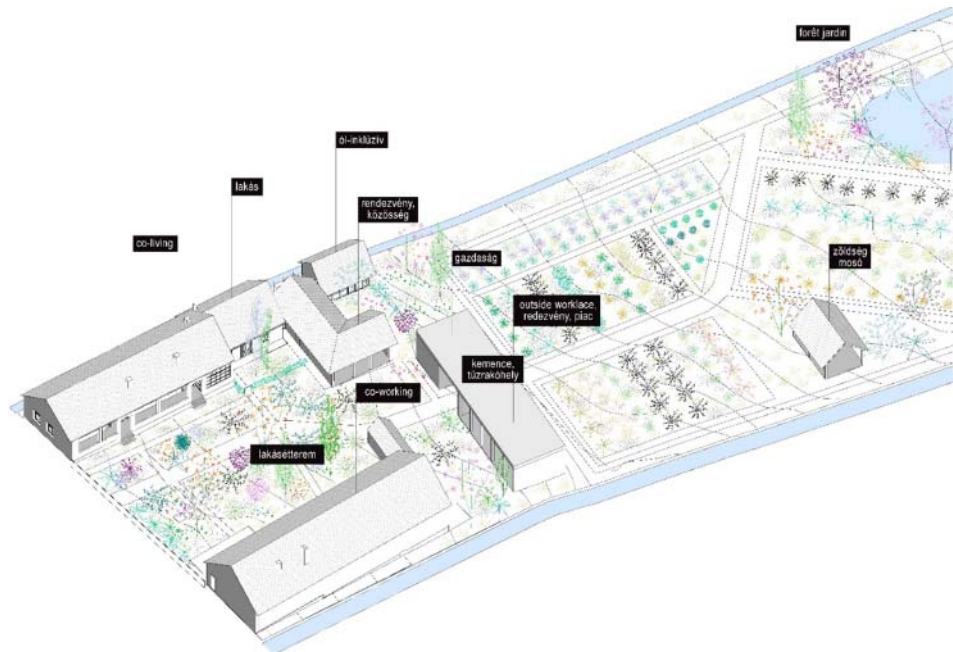


Figure 5: Architectural concept plan

The strategy extends to a wider circle than just the project site, to the level of cooperation with the village community. A "bottom-up" approach is applied, the community is involved in decision-making. The issue of the planned digital nomad center was and will continue to be discussed at the village meetings. Start of a social process is already being felt through the emergence of the villager's creative ideas and social cohesion.

Collaboration with local and international businesses and organizations is a cornerstone of the project. Furthermore, establishing connections with digital nomad communities strengthen the project's global network. Community events create opportunities for residents and professionals to connect, collaborate, and exchange ideas.

Both during the design and operation of the farm, special attention is paid to aspects of environmental and social sustainability. Particular attention is paid to building utilization, recycled and environmentally conscious materials, energy management, waste management and short supply chain. In terms of social responsibility, special attention is paid to the involvement of the local producers and service providers.

DISCUSSION

Inviting digital nomads to rural villages can bring many benefits and help create a more sustainable and vibrant future for the inhabitants of the settlement, but also for digital nomads. While digital nomadism in rural areas has clear benefits, there are also challenges to be faced. These include the need for and availability of adequate infrastructure, as well as issues of social inclusion and community engagement. By fostering collaboration between digital nomads and village dwellers, architecture can help support the needs of this emerging demographic, while preserving the unique identity of rural communities. The impact of established co-working spaces on rural society and infrastructure is not necessarily immediate, as it takes time to fully embrace the concept, but the impact on the village community of Pécsdevecser can already be felt, even in the preparational phase of the project.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ecofarm and digital nomad center in Pécsdevecser can lay the foundation for a new era of co-working initiatives in rural Hungary. This project offers unique opportunities in the field of rural co-working, which can be further developed and applied to other similar initiatives. The experiences and lessons learned here can contribute to exploiting mutual benefits between digital nomads and rural communities, promoting sustainability and spreading innovative solutions in the global context as well.

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