

Care farming in Austria – A spatial analysis of state of play and looking out on the near future

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Abstract: *The polarisation into on the one hand structurally strong and on the other hand structurally weak rural areas caused by economic and demographic factors call for sustainable solutions in social care of the elderly especially in structurally weak rural areas. Besides socio-medical care performed by nursing staff at home for those among the elderly who are not able or willing to move to a nursery home one option is being seen in care farming. Several projects related to care farming have been already started in Austria. They often are promoted to be income-producing. Regarding this spatial aspects rarely are being pointed out in current discussion. But the analysis of spatial aspects really is necessary because among them there can be found substantial factors for success or failure. For example location of the farm, its distance to small village centres, the existence, availability and structure of local amenities as well as commuting areas of potential demanders play an important role. Looking ahead into the near future there are a lot of uncertainties about the answer of the question, if care-farming gained more popularity and what is about the potential demanders' profile. Considering this it is necessary to look at the impacts and interrelations between a variety of spatial aspects and developments and to focus on the qualities and deficiencies of the structurally different types of rural areas precisely.*

Keywords: *assisted living on farms, quality of life, provision, relevance of spatial aspects and developments*

Introduction

The polarisation into on the one hand structurally strong and on the other hand structurally weak rural areas caused by economic and demographic factors call for sustainable solutions in social care of the elderly especially in structurally weak rural areas.

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This paper critically focuses on the following three key-issues – all related to rural areas in Austria:

1. What types of care farms exist and what are the experiences with this “new” offer for the elderly from the provider’s and demander’s point of view?
2. What is the interrelation between spatial aspects and successful care-farming?
3. Will care-farming gain more popularity in the near future and why (not) and what will the potential demanders’ profile look like?

Defining “care-farming” and types of care-farming

This article bases on the following definition of care-farming: Care-farming or „Betreutes Wohnen auf dem Bauernhof für Senioren“ (“assisted living on farms for the elderly”) or rather „Bäuerliche Seniorenbetreuung“ (Austria, Germany) or rather “Betreutes Wohnen in Familien auf dem Bauernhof” (Switzerland) means an option for old people to spend their lives independently on farms – the adapted housing units range from 40 up to 70 m² – including the opportunity of care in the case of becoming physically handicapped.

It is important not to mix up care-farming in the used sense with a nursery home at the farm.

There are different kinds of offers within care-farming regarding the depth of supply: Care-farming ranges from renting adapted housing units up to a variety of additional offers: Domestic services (e. g. cooking, tidying up, helping with daily activities) as well as other personal services (e. g. care, transport) can additionally be purchased.

In general, two kinds of offers can be distinguished: care-farming including residence at the farm on times (senior holidays, holidays abroad the nursery home, lunch, senior clubs, day-care) or care-farming including permanent residence (assisted living in adapted housing units, share a home).

For the owners of farms this means an additional purchase “at home”, the opportunity to fill open working capacities and being employed e. g. at the Red Cross (who offers professional ambulant care-support for the elderly). Furthermore, care-farming can secure the succession on the farm and help it survive, because caring for the elderly could become more and more an interesting field of employment especially for female family. Additionally as well as in general, the willingness to care for the old is a very important task within today’s aging rural and urban society.

Thinking about potential demanders of this kind of offer one can state that care-farming could be interesting for those who prefer rural life and who are looking for an independent life in ones’ own four walls outside of nursery homes. Care-farming can be seen as an alternative to common nursery homes or rather assisted living in bigger units. Despite the number of actual suppliers of “Betreutes Wohnen auf dem Bauernhof” in Austria is quite small – care-farming is offered by farmers in Upper Austria (10 to 13 farmers), Styria (10 farmers) and Carinthia (1 farmer) – one can say that it could be interesting for all who come from the (rural) neighbourhood (e. g. former farmers themselves, note: the influence of personal aspects and social control), old people from urban areas who have spent their holidays for years in rural areas or rather on farms and for all who do not see from their own point of view any other opportunities of being looked after in the need of care.

In case of needing long-term help, care can be guaranteed by a member of the farmers’ family who is qualified to take over socio-medical care or maybe ambulant organisations who offer socio-medical care. There still remains the option to move to a nursery home if ones’ physical conditions are that bad that the farmers’ qualification cannot guarantee perfect care any longer.

Nevertheless, relating to decision of a farmer to become a “care-farmer” several financial and personal challenges have to be pointed out: Supplying two to four adapted housing units for old people require a lot of preparation: high investment costs and financial efforts, knowledge about contract conditions, uncertainty about actual demand and necessity of “purchasing care” from the farmer (depending on the requirement of care), binding (female) family members on a long-term basis to agriculture and spending much time getting educated in socio-medical care as well as lacking personal distance to the persons being looked after.

Despite these factors care-farming often is being seen as a hope and a chance for women within agriculture: staying at home (with their own children) and being employed without the necessity of commuting daily.

Organisation and contracting regarding “assisted living on farms for the elderly”:

The family member who is qualified in socio-medical care often is employed in an organisation that professionally offers socio-medical care for the old. The farmer and the client who rents a housing unit make a contract as well as the person and the care-organisation (“care-contract”).

Former success of the suppliers of “assisted living on farms for the elderly” has its basis on the following factors: intense public relation (note: high costs of marketing), personal and professional qualification, willingness of female farmers to take over this tasks, controlling operated by the district government.

On the interrelation between spatial aspects and successful care-farming

General requirements must be met to be able to successfully offer “assisted living on farms for the elderly”:

1. Personal and family-related requirements of farmers and their families (physically, psychologically, socio-medical education, clearness about ones’ willingness to offer several types of care)
2. Legal requirements comprising laws relating to taxes, insurances, nursery homes, construction requirements, spatial planning, ÖKL-guidelines concerning “assisted living on farms for the elderly” approved by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management.
3. Infrastructural requirements of the farm itself and its surrounding: e. g. furniture and equipment, adaptation (e. g. facilities with toilets), removing barriers, structure of site (flat terrain, sunny).
4. Economic and financial requirements: e. g. actual demand and continuity of demand by (potential) clients, kinds of (public) financial support systems for adaptation of the farms.
5. Necessity of cooperation and coordination: important to come to an agreement with (ambulant) care-organisations.
6. Infrastructural requirements: Considering to offer “assisted living on the farm for the elderly” the owners of a farm have to think about the infrastructural quality of the farms’ surrounding. The ÖKL (1999) states the importance of the following aspects, e.g. the availability and importance of:
 - shops (goods of daily supply), postal and other public services
 - pharmacy and doctors, socio-medical care
 - personal services (e. g. hair dressers, pedicure)
 - restaurants and cafés
 - public transport (bus stations)
 - guaranteed mobility for the clients (e. g. the farmer takes them to the doctor or to shops)
 - keeping social contacts (incl. the local youth)
 - the clients’ emotional well-being (the relevance of the Church, inclusion into the farmer’s family and the village community, reliable persons within the farmers’ family, pets allowed, meaningful activities, membership of senior associations, visiting cultural events)

Most of these spatial or rather infrastructural requirements do not exist in remote rural areas any more. That is why they have to be compensated by re-organisation and re-thinking substitutes. In the following some considerations are presented:

The lack of shops in the direct surrounding of the farm could be substituted by organised shopping trips for the non-automobile seniors or a delivery service could be arranged (e. g. newspapers, magazines; note: additional costs!).

Long distances to the next pharmacy are a minor problem if the doctor – visiting the old at their housing units on the farm – brings medicine with him. Professional care can be offered by the qualified farmers' wife or employees of professional care-organisations.

Many personal services are already being offered ambulantly (e.g. hair dressers, pedicure; note: additional costs!)

In the case of deficiencies regarding the villages' supply with restaurants and cafés as meeting places "assisted living on farms for the elderly" can offer lunch. Care-organisations often offer "meals on wheels", too.

Public transport should guarantee the olds' mobility. If not, the seniors could for instance organise "transport-communities" for themselves.

Organising different events for the elderly on the farm contributes to their emotional well-being. The contribution of the village community as well as the local youth should be taken into consideration, too. Reliable persons who visit the old regularly at home could be priests, members of the farmers' family, own family members as well as persons who do honorary work within the support of the elderly.

A critical analysis of the opportunities to substitute infrastructural deficiencies considers following issues:

In general, those who chose "assisted living on farms" cannot rely on daily support of their own family members.

Considering new forms of support among the old themselves – on the one hand of those, who chose "assisted living on farms", on the other hand of those, who are still able to live at home –, socio-spatial aspects play an important role. Above all spatial distances between the residences of the old and their family members or rather their friends or rather former colleagues are the biggest obstacle, because in cases of emergency help from the clients' family members or rather friends cannot be got on time. Furthermore, the expends especially for those, who are not automobile, to reach the farm where the client lives often is very big.

In infrastructurally weak and remote rural it can be observed that spatial aspects have an enormous impact on the quality of social life of old people. The following figure (Fig. 1) shows the interrelation between the various spatial aspects. One easily can understand that particularly physically handicapped old people – nowadays still very often non-automobile – suffer much from the thinning of daily supply of goods and services (incl. public transport), sprawl and long walking distances. If "assisted living for the elderly" is being situated in infrastructurally weak and remote rural areas the clients are confronted to all these spatial and infrastructural deficiencies as well as those who still live in their own four walls at home.

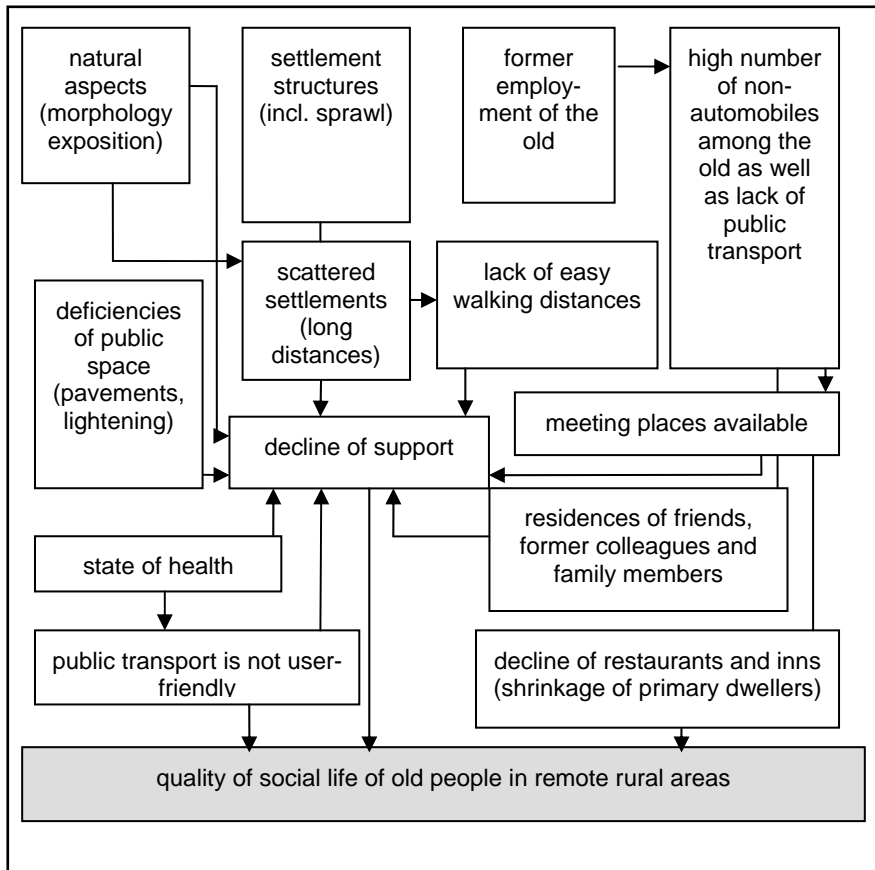


Figure 1. The influence of spatial aspects on the quality of social life of today's old people in remote rural areas (see Fischer, 2005).

Looking ahead into the near future: Will care-farming gain more popularity and how will the potential demanders' profile look like?

Regarding the living-conditions of old people in differently structured rural areas in Austria it can be seen that especially infrastructurally weak and remote rural areas suffer from aging and out-migration of the young. That means becoming old there more and more becomes a challenge. Natural aspects, settlement structures, the thinning of daily supply and family support continuously gain more importance in daily life. That is why these rural areas lag behind the requirements and demands of today's older generation. In structurally weak rural areas people fear the decreasing of daily supply (goods and services) and (social) medical care at the local level. In strong rural areas a diversification of supply in all intents and purposes is welcome. That is why it can be assumed that the circumstances of daily life of the old in rural areas, the farms' proximity to the next village (centre) and to the social-stations of care-organisations as well as good marketing have been responsible for the actual success of the new offer "assisted living on farms for the elderly".

Considerations on changes relating to the quality of the village community and the profile of the potential demanders of tomorrow are not taken into account yet.

It is worth thinking about the following changes and challenges expected in general, regarding to e. g. socio-gerontological and socio-psychological as well as socio-economic aspects. In the following the most important and still unsolved questions risen from reflecting the quality of life of old people in rural areas in Austria are being listed.

The profile and spatial behaviour of today's older generation is very heterogeneous. The perception of the interrelation of spatial aspects and deficiencies of supply (at the local level) strongly depends on the subjective awareness.

1. How will rejuvenation of age (subjective perception of age), longevity, new self-confidence and assumed increasing selfishness affect the quality of life of the old in rural areas? What do these aspects mean for estimating the number of (potential) clients for “assisted living on farms for the elderly”?
2. Will being used to comfort lead to refuse “assisted living on farms for the elderly” in favour of nursery homes?
3. What will be about honorary work within the group of the 60+ and their willingness to support the old living on care-farms?

The spatial radius of today’s older generations depends on their (auto) mobility. Spatial aspects do not only cause spatial behaviour, they are often been affected by spatial behaviour (of today’s older generation), too. The increasing of auto-mobility (also among today’s older generation) endangers the quality of life of those who depend on spatial vicinity.

4. Who will prefer aging in rural areas regarding spatial developments and economic decline of remote rural areas (note the importance of identification)?
5. What is about freedom of choice regarding goods and services and the thinning of supply?

In remote and sparsely populated rural areas the quality and availability of ambulant socio-medical care in the near future is still unsure. The most relevant aspects regarding this issue are the fluctuation of actual demanders, the question of critical masses as well as the efficiency of the suppliers. Several uncertainties like non-secured succession on the farm or rather the willingness of female relatives to qualify themselves in fields of socio-medical care about stabilisation and potential of this offer have to be thought about in future as well as the discussion of decreasing private and public financial rooms for manoeuvre.

6. How will decreasing private and public financial rooms for manoeuvre influence decisions about the organisation of ambulant and stationary forms of care for the elderly in rural areas in general? Will “assisted living on farms for the elderly” be a sustain kind of offer especially in structurally weak rural areas, or will it compete more and more against stationary forms of care like e. g. nursery homes?

Additionally there is hardly information available about the role of senior associations for old people’s well-being in rural areas and their potential getting involved into the offer “assisted living on farms for the elderly”.

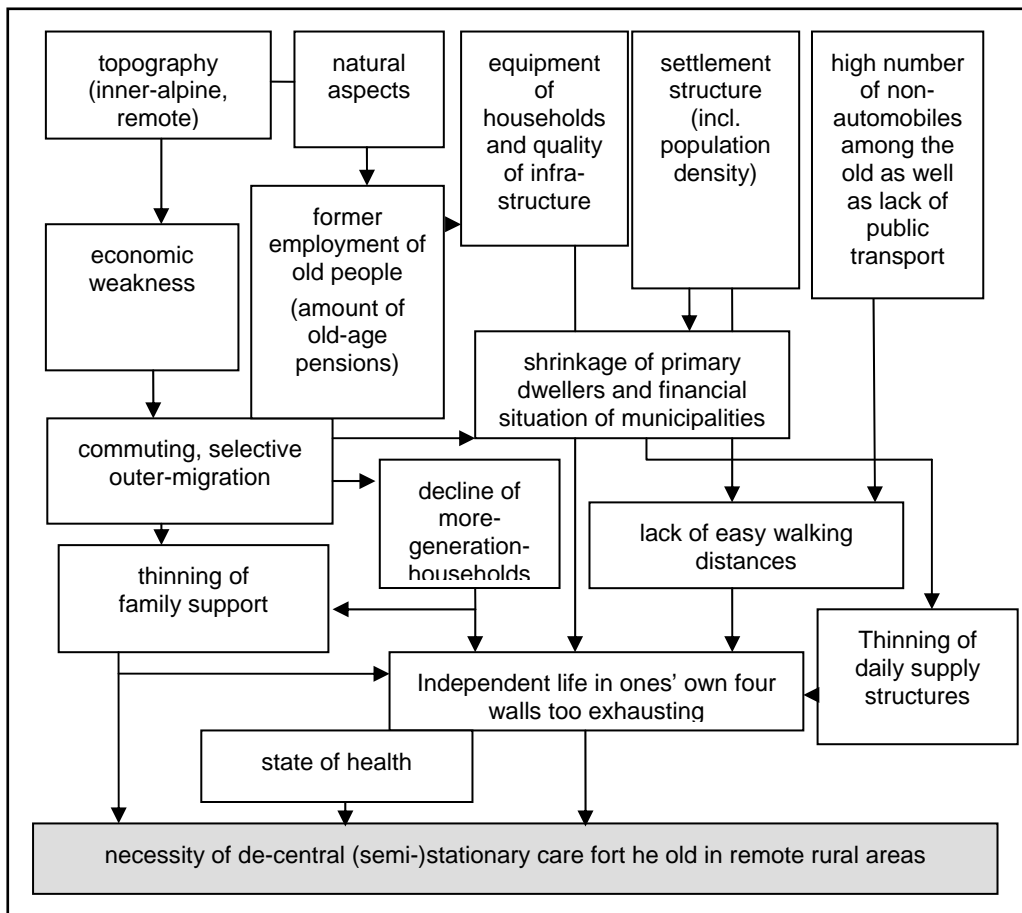


Figure 2. Spatial aspects strengthening the necessity of de-central (semi-)stationary care for the old in remote rural areas (see Fischer, 2005).

	quality of social networks of old people rural areas			
	family support	relevance of neighbourhood	village community	associations
trends in structurally weak rural areas, characterized by marginality	↘	↘	→	↔
trends in suburban rural areas	↔	↘	↔	→
trends in inner-alpine rural areas with high relevance of tourism	↘	↔	↔	→
trends in inner-alpine, peripheral structurally weak areas	↓	↘	↘	↔

Figure 3. Impacts of socio-demographic, socio-economic and settlement development on the quality of social networks of old people in different types of rural areas (see Fischer, 2005).

Can these considerations on expected spatial developments really be a basis for farmers to prepare for and invest in care-farming?

Many questions are still left open. That is why in general it is very hard to estimate the potential of care-farming in the future.

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