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## **Structural Change in the Rhineland Mining Area**

**presented by Mr. Ralph Sterck**  
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### **1. Structural Change, and why it's inevitable**

The transformation process in the Rhineland Mining Area (German: „Rheinisches Revier“; also part of Theo company's name) is already ongoing, and not only beginning this year. When you look at how the region has transformed during the past decades, how open-cast mining fields have given way to renaturalised areas like Sophia Heights („Sophienhöhe“) near Jülich, while the actual fields have moved on, it's quite evident that an actual change has been starting years ago.

Dozens of wind turbines are already generating power in that very area nowadays while the mining fields are still active, and research sites nearby are developing and attracting highly talented people to live and work in the region, as well as they attract international attention. In the future, there will be three big lakes where the mining happens today. Around them, innovative residential and commercial space will grow. A reorganization of the landscape's surface in this area brings great opportunities.

The fact that a comprehensive transition now is literally inevitable for this region, is a consequence of the lignite mining phase-out, which was decided and pronounced by the German Federal Government in 2020. Therefore, it's binding that by 2038 at the latest, the last lignite excavator will be shut down and mining will be reduced to zero step by step.

Among other effects, this means that the people who are employed in lignite mining now will no longer be able to continue working in their original jobs. And fossil fuels will no longer be available to generate electricity and heat. These two points alone make it clear why a transformation is inevitable: We must make sure that people continue to have jobs. And we must make sure that the energy supply is guaranteed. This is linked to many other issues, which is why it's essential to approach structural change as a holistic challenge.

## **2. Zukunftsagentur, and why our work holds all threads together**

Our non-profit company, which meets this challenge, is named Zukunftsagentur. The literal translation would read „future agency“, which can be considered a symbolic name, because our mission is to help the region transform its strengths to become fit for the future. Zukunftsagentur actually is a regional development agency for the Rhineland Mining Area, that's what's hidden behind that name. We address all fields of activities which are essential for the structural transition.

Our experts focus on four defined fields of activities: „energy and industry“, „resources and agribusiness“, „innovation and education“, „spatial development and infrastructure“. This makes evident how versatile the challenges regarding the transformation process are, as they touch nearly each scope of everyday life.

There's a need to invent new energy sources: innovation. There's a need to empower people to upskill for future job demands: education. There's a need to think about what happens to the huge areas which are open mining fields now, and how to use these places for settlement and renaturation in future: spatial development. There's a need to provide commuters with functional transport links to make the region an attractive place to live in: infrastructure. There's a need to protect and use the highly fertile soil of the region: agribusiness. There's a need to rethink building, and prefer recycling and circular use: resources. Energy and industry are the most evident topics, as there's the urgent need to provide citizens and companies in the region with a stable and climate-friendly energy supply.

As you can guess, the changes are going to touch all these topics so comprehensively that many hundreds of experts as well as companies and institutions will be involved. In order to coordinate all these activities and to keep aligning them with the goals, a guiding hand is needed to hold all the threads together. Zukunftsagentur is that hand, that's our task.

## **3. Qualification and funding of projects that support structural change**

Facing structural change with a holistic perspective certainly is not a solo effort. As you have probably heard, the German Federal Government has promised a total of 14.8 billion euros in funding for structural change in the Rhineland Mining Area by 2038. Zukunftsagentur does not administer this money; as explained, we have a coordinating and informing role. Meanwhile, the money is distributed among many different funding pots, which in turn are administered by the Federal and State Governments and their ministries.

In order to make sure that the money actually flows into projects which will foreseeably advance structural change, we have developed a three-star qualification procedure before applications are submitted. That's how we indirectly advise the governments how to spend this money.

Simplified, the stars work like this: Idea providers submit sketches of possible projects. Experts evaluate the sketches and advise idea providers on how to develop them further. As soon as it's clear that the project idea will benefit structural change, it receives the first star. If the further developed outline fulfils all the requirements for applying for funding, it gets the second star. If access to funding is identified, the third star is awarded. In the two preliminary programmes, „SofortprogrammPLUS“ and „Starterpaket Kernrevier“, a total of almost 40 third stars have already been awarded. So these projects are already ready to start.

#### **4. „Economic and Structural Programme“ as a guideline**

Of course, we don't do all this by gut feeling, but by clearly defined criteria and aims. Our 228 pages long publication called „Economic and Structural Programme“ summarises all this. It is a guideline for structural change. And not only input from our experts and their networks has gone into it, but also the opinion of the people in the region, whom we reached out to via citizen participation, as well as comments and approaches from 46 institutions, administrations and organisations. Having this in a written form, is like a reference book for possible questions concerning where we want to go.

What actually is a top priority on the task list of the whole region, is creating new jobs, and upskilling people who are likely to lose their job soon. As the overall trend worldwide is to conserve finite resources, and to rely on renewable and climate-friendly alternatives, it is foreseeable that coal mining is a dying profession. This is a completely natural development. But, of course, people need to continuously have an income, and therefore they have to rethink and retrain. We want to accompany them in this process as well. These jobs cannot be transferred one to one, but we are doing everything possible to give companies incentives to locate their business in our region, and to support people in helping themselves, as it were, through further qualification in the appropriate field.

Our timeframe is quite narrow. We don't have 50 years, but less than 20, and many would like the whole process to go even faster and talk about 2030. Change depends on many factors, and if means, infrastructure and attitude are right, it can be happening very quickly. That's why it's important that we don't turn individual screws now, but that we keep the entire clockwork in motion and take the people along. Because without them it won't work.

Together, we need to find adequate substitutes for creation of value and employment, create new quality of life by a new order of space, and become a model region for reliable energy supply and resource security. Those are our main tasks in a successful structural change. And the process has already begun.

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