

Austrian Rural Fieldsite

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Location of the fieldsite

The municipality of Schönau occupies 38.6 km² in the Lower Mühlviertel region, a hilly region in the northeastern corner of Upper Austria.

Specific situation

In 2001, Schönau was home to 1818 inhabitants, only one third of which lived close to the village proper and even fewer in the center of Schönau. Jobs are rare in the region, and 67.2% of Schönau's working population has to commute to jobs outside the district. Mobility is a central issue for all residents of Schönau, be it for work, leisure or other everyday activities. The gradual abandonment of agriculturally used areas and the out-migration to urban centers are challenges facing Schönau, which is classified as a "marginalized rural area", which is characterized by low population density, minimal availability of infrastructure and services, low income, poor educational levels, and lacking integration into the national economy. To combat these developments, Schönau has been one of the co-founders of the regional association "Mühlviertler Alm", which has been in the business of stimulating regional development since the early 1990s. Numerous EU projects and Agenda 21 initiatives have been the result, also fostering the sentiment of regional belonging.



Farm wives doing festive work (photo: Gertraud Seiser)



Landscape (photo: Gertraud Seiser)



Neighbours after working together (photo: Matthias Hartl)

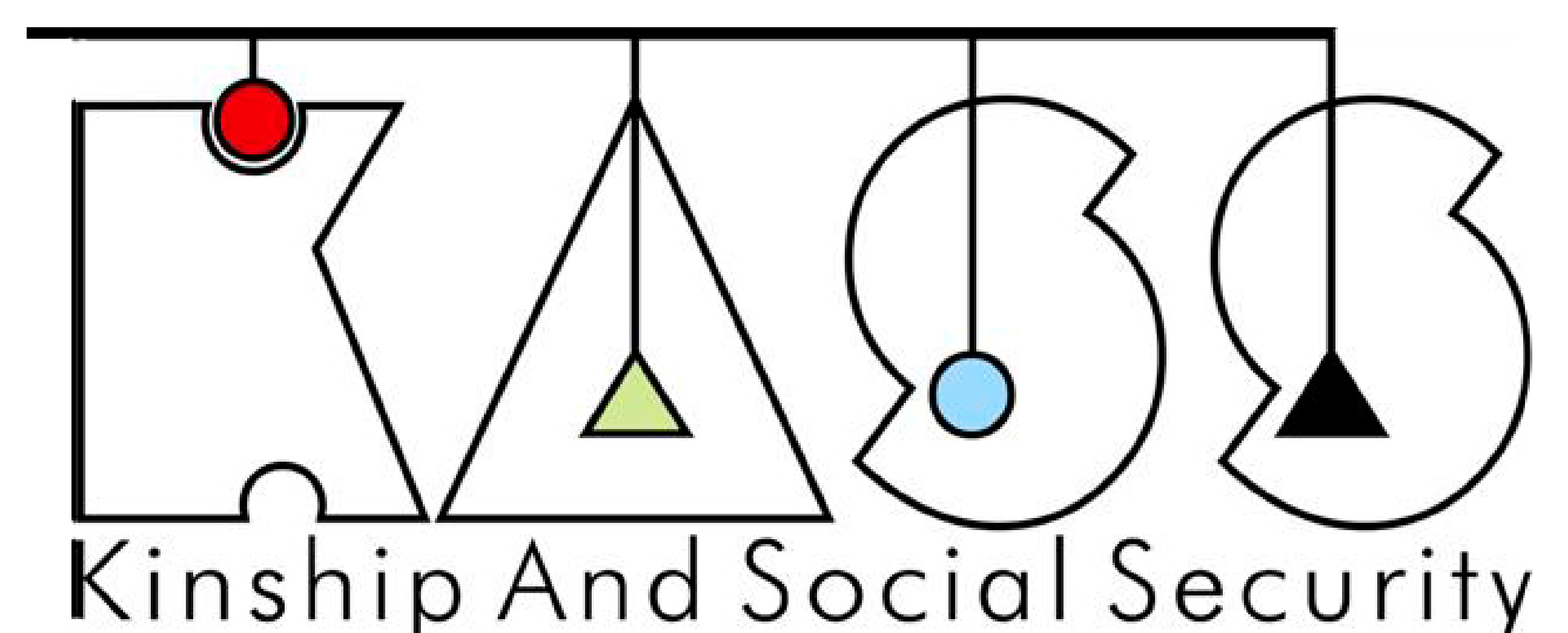


Neighborly and Kinship Relations

Schönau is characterized by a tightly woven social network and a high degree of social interaction. Most residents have genealogical and/or affinal ties to other inhabitants of Schönau. In addition, there are close neighborly relations and a highly active network of voluntary associations. The great importance of kinship is also reflected in the KNQs, which comprise 144 persons on average; horizontal ties including affinal links are most prominent, while genealogical depth is not great. Spatial proximity seems to be a prerequisite for social interaction, which results in a high rate of local endogamy.

Communal Cohesion

While social classes do exist, they are mitigated by public performances that emphasize communal cohesion. The model for this cohesion seems to be an idealized notion of the farm as a kinship and neighborhood based economic unit encompassing several generations. A remarkable phenomenon in Schönau is the relative affluence of residents, which is disproportionate to their family incomes. This relative affluence can be explained only by reference to a sizeable informal economic sector, in which kinship and neighborhood networks provide information, services, and goods at very low prices.



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