

KombiBus — Delivering passengers, freight and post in rural Germany

By Arne Kempers, Nordregio

The “KombiBus” is a mobility project initiated by Interlink GmbH, a Berlin-based consultancy and project management company in the field of mobility and traffic planning, together with partners Fahrplangesellschaft B&B mbH and the raumkom Institut für Raumentwicklung und Kommunikation. In cooperation with the regional transport company in the region, the Uckermärkische Verkehrsgesellschaft (UVG) and with funds from the Ministry of the Interior the KombiBus project was initiated.

Preconditions, inspiration, nurture

KombiBus started in 2010 as a pilot project in the Uckermark region, a rural area around 80km north of Berlin. The general idea is a bus service that combines passenger transport with freight- and post-delivery. The concept is not new: similar services exist in Switzerland and Sweden and until the 1970s, a passenger/freight bus service operated in Germany. The KombiBus project reinvigorates the concept and improves it with IT-features.

The problems that were identified in the Uckermark region are familiar problems faced by rural areas everywhere: the logistical challenge is to be solved, especially concerning the last mile to ensure a sufficient availability of suppliers at reasonable transport costs. While the transport sector misses bundling effects that increase transport prices, the funding of public transportation remains a key challenge in rural areas. Factors, such as the declining numbers of pupils, the strategy of economic concentration, which go hand in hand with increasing mobility and distances, influence long-term financing provided by the public authorities. The main challenges of public transport and logistic services are to gain additional income and margin returns.

For the inhabitants this means that the activity range, especially for people with lower incomes or health restrictions, is reduced, limiting their opportunities for social interaction, health care and employment. For manufacturers in the region it becomes more expensive and difficult to transport their products to the market place, putting their business under pressure and making the region less attractive for new businesses.

Picture 1 KombiBus- unloading and reloading in front of the cheese-farm in Bandelow, district of Uckermark. Source: KombiBUS Gruppe



As is often the case, the region falls into a vicious cycle where the poor mobility level drives inhabitants and companies out of the region, further aggravating the situation. Citizens in rural areas who do not dispose of a private car are primarily affected by this. They are often less mobile and see the service level in their region decrease.

The following target groups were identified:

- Residents in the area that do not have a private car
- Manufacturers in the area that want to transport their products out of the region (mainly food producers/farmers)
- Postal services that struggle to maintain an economically viable service in the area
- Retailers that benefit from good accessibility to their location
- Visitors that come into the area

The main challenge in the KombiBus project was to initiate communication between the regional actors in order to develop new business opportunities and to maintain or improve the mobility of the abovementioned target groups with the limited funds available from the regional transport company and guarantee a viable, long-term transport solution for the region.

Implementation

Resources:

The pilot project was publicly funded as a part of [a mobility project of the German federal ministry of the Interior](#) (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2011). The project partners initiated the pilot project in 2010 and started the cooperation with the regional transport company Uckermärkische Verkehrsgesellschaft (UVG).

The busses that service the bus line were already owned by the regional transport company. Their bus drivers received additional training in logistics and handling cargo i.e. the loading and unloading of the freight or securing cargo within the vehicle.

During the pilot phase, the project partners and the UVG discovered that the concept caught on and is financially feasible. Therefore, in 2014, it was decided to continue the service and currently the KombiBus is commercially operated by the UVG.

To reduce expenses, the manual planning and disposition of KombiBus-tours was set up in Excel at the start of the pilot period. Since 2014, [Interlink GmbH undertakes efforts](#) to develop a digital platform "LandLogistik" to link free cargo areas of freight and passenger traffic in real time and provider-independent to combined transport chains. Whether truck, railway, bus, cargo bike or drone - depending on strategic strength and cost structure, transport services between the market participants are to be redesigned and organized - taking into account rural and urban space. This should provide a solution to the "last mile" problem in transport i.e. the transport to and from major transport hubs.

Barriers, challenges and enablers

Major obstructions or conflicts of interest were not encountered during the pilot phase of the project. There were no conflicts of interest with private delivery companies like DHL and UPS that operate in the region. The most apparent reason for this is that the KombiBus services the last-mile region where these companies prefer not to be active, mainly because of the high operating cost.

The four major enablers that contributed to the success of the project were:

- The local authorities
- The regional public transport company Uckermärkische Verkehrsgesellschaft (UVG)
- The federal ministry of the Interior
- The first manufacturers and producers in the Uckermark Region that started collaborating with KombiBus

The local authorities and the UVG were on board from the beginning, supporting and actively partaking in the project. Although the local authorities had to economise on regional transport, they did want to maintain the level of mobility in the region and therefore fully cooperated on the project. The collaboration with the UVG was crucial for the success of the pilot project — the KombiBus could use the material i.e. busses, the bus drivers, the routes and the infrastructure of the UVG.

The federal ministry of the Interior has played an important enabling role in the pilot project. The support of the ministry legitimised the project for the project partners and the inhabitants in the Uckermark Region. Because the project had the ministry as an ambassador, trust was created with the first local producers to participate in the project.

The first manufacturers and producers in the region (mainly farmers) proved of major importance in establishing a network of partners that would ship their products with the KombiBus. They gave off a signal to other producers in the region that the KombiBus was a viable solution for shipping their products. Furthermore, the KombiBus project leaders could use their regional business network to actively search for and contact potential partners. One of the first customers, a large producer of agricultural products, has built a cooled storage space next to a KombiBus stop where other producers can deliver their products to. The producers therefore do not have to be at the bus stop at the time the KombiBus is scheduled to arrive, but can leave their products there at any time. This not only enables the KombiBus to operate efficiently but increases its efficacy and catchment area.

The KombiBus project group identified the following industry sectors that have a demand for a solution like KombiBus in their area.

- The food sector
- The logistic sector
- The tourism sector
- The health sector

These sectors were identified based on their need for freight capacity or need for good accessibility to their location. Many of the players in these sectors cannot maintain a logistics network on their own and thus benefit from a solution like KombiBus.

The biggest challenges in the pilot project was convincing the users of the feasibility of the concept and persuading them to cooperate. Although the concept of combined passenger and freight transport has existed before in Germany, the producers and customers were initially sceptical. A shift in thinking was required as producers and customers had a centralised market mindset i.e. a belief that goods must be bought at a central market in a medium-sized or large city. In practice, this meant that goods were produced in the Uckermark Region, transported to Berlin, bought there by consumers from the region and thus transported back to the region. With the KombiBus, this unnecessary step could be eliminated by transporting the goods from the regional producers to the regional consumers e.g. restaurants, hotels and shops. Explaining the cost and time savings of this system was quite challenging — Interlink made personal visits to every producer in the region to explain the benefits of the KombiBus approach.

Legal Issues:

Regarding data protection, no problems have occurred because the communication and booking was done through telephone, email and Excel. In 2017 the development of concept concerning the digital platform for the KombiBus was started. The booking, tour planning and scheduling will go through the platform, which can be accessed by the bus drivers, the consumers, the producers and the UVG. When the platform is launched, data protection will have a high priority.

The main legal issues regarded the question whether a municipal organisation was allowed to perform commercial delivery services. This question was already solved in the pilot phase, which was necessary to build up confidence and reliability for shareholders, partners and customers. Legal consultants were assigned during the project term to evaluate **legal framework**.

It was concluded that the innovative idea of the KombiBus — the combination of public passenger and freight traffic— although not being actually described is not excluded in the current federal legislation e.g. the Passenger Transport Law ([PBefG](#)) and the Road Transport Act ([GüKG](#)). The main question was at the end if a public institute like the UVG was allowed to compete with private companies on the transport market. The legal opinion attested that KombiBus was operating within the law and obtained legal approval under the condition that the service would maintain normal market prices and using only existing capacities (terms of the local constitution of the federal state of Brandenburg).

The outcomes and effects of the mobility solution – and further development

In 2014, the KombiBus became an independent, commercial part of the local transport company. Together with the digital platform that calculates freight capacity of different carriers developed by Interlink, they will increase the efficiency and sustainability of rural logistic systems soon. The KombiBus project presents a sustainable, long-term mobility solution for the rural area. Its economic viability is crucial since transport companies in many rural areas must economise and thus need an independent, commercially operated alternative.

As an outcome the employment in the area has increased because the access to new local sales markets new local markets (e.g. tourist centres, hotels and restaurants) lead to an increase of production in the region. KombiBus was furthermore a great marketing campaign: By explaining the timetable in order to use public transport for goods, it reminded the dialogue partners to take the bus themselves instead of using the own car.

Further development

KombiBus needs desperately a digital solution in order to reduce manual administrative effort by automatizing route planning. Especially when the sending volume extents. This will be the concern of LaLoG LandLogistik GmbH in the near future, a start-up company, with Interlink GmbH as one of three shareholders.

As of 2018, LandLogistik negotiates with a German railway company to adopt the KombiBus-concept as kombiBAHN. By involving the railway companies with focus on smallest quantities, the capacity and range for freight transport increases tremendously, while reducing personnel and transportation costs for consignors and to cut CO₂ emissions.

Crucial for the successful implementation of KombiBus has been the presence at the regional level i.e. to have an office or some other kind of representation in the area. The project partners have been very careful to avoid the image of being a patronising institution from the big city. Being anchored in the region was important for the acceptance of KombiBus among the inhabitants of the region. Another key factor for success has been the creation of awareness of the project. It proved challenging to guide attention to KombiBus and keep the attention of the inhabitants. The project partners assumed this was partly due to the fact that the rural population is not very acquainted with public transport. Therefore, elaborate and extensive marketing was needed with a lot of personal approach trying to convince potential customers of the benefits of KombiBus, which are:

- Increasing the potential to participate in the labour market and social life
- Better access to food, financial and health services
- A daily transport mode, arriving at scheduled times, servicing every village in the region several times per day
- Maintaining delivery to areas that are unprofitable for companies without own delivery vehicles
- More efficient use of freight capacities and a better connection between them

- A reduction of CO₂-emissions compared to private car use

Implementing a rural mobility solution is a long-term process demanding a lot of communication and persuasion. Gaining publicity and emphasising the time and financial benefit of the solution have been the central elements for the successful implementation of the KombiBus

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