

Conference – green urban commons, Vienna 23rd-24th October, abstract Judith Schicklinski, PhD-student university of Bolzano

issue : role of green urban activities in contemporary processes of urban development
«Civil society actors as drivers of socio-ecological transition? Green spaces in European cities as laboratories of social innovation»

Global climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the end of fossil resources require a paradigmatic shift in direction of sustainable forms of organising society and economy within a limited time frame. Yet, the persistence of the economic growth logic manifests itself in ongoing soil sealing and urban sprawl due to infrastructure and building development pressure, threatening existing green spaces. Across European cities, the use of urban space is highly controversial and subject to diverging interests, yielding a high conflict potential. The access to and the re-claiming of urban green commons – particularly forms of self-organised use and management of urban green spaces, seem to be in the centre of a global citizens movement, acting on local level as politics of eco-social transition from below.

Against this background, the research focuses on social innovative civil society dynamics on the grassroots level and on citizen participation in the governance of green spaces in several European cities, asking for the role of civil society actors in the post-growth debate, examining their position vis-à-vis state and market players and exploring their activities' impacts on local level. The research investigates from a comparative case study approach, under what local conditions and to which extent civil society can be a transition driver in the resource system green spaces in European cities. To this end, two specific questions are posed : (a) How can citizen groups contribute to maintaining existing green spaces that are available and accessible for all and which should be expanded whilst assuring biodiversity and providing for a diversity of uses for local needs at the same time?; (b) Which policy framework allows for constructive collaboration between local authorities' economic actors and citizens, enabling innovative solutions in green spaces governance, urban food production and participatory urban development?

The research firstly aims to provide a deepened analysis of actors, processes, and contributions of citizen-driven activities within green space governance and urban food production in European cities. Secondly, its goal is to present 'best practice' examples and to identify institutional conditions under which they have evolved in order to prepare replicability elsewhere. Lastly, its objective is to direct the attention of researchers and policy-makers to civil society actors, recognising their role and potential in contributing to, initiating, and sustaining processes of transition across European cities, in order to create improved framework conditions for their involvement.

The data was obtained in the scope of the ongoing four-year FP7 Collaborative Research Project « Welfare, Wealth and Work for Europe – WWWforEurope » (www.foreurope.eu), more specifically in area 5 «Regions in Transition ». In a mixed method approach the qualitative data stemming from 55 semi-structured expert interviews from 29 cities from all four European regions—14 countries (1-4 interviews per city) —conducted with actors from politics/administration (N=7), the economic sector (N=21) and civil society (N=27) were analysed and interpreted with the help of qualitative content analysis, and results were triangulated with the quantitative questionnaire results filled in by the same actors as well as with a case study report for each city.

First results show that across European cities, self-organised and co-operative civil society movements in the field of green spaces have emerged to tackle local challenges, becoming active players in local governance processes, yet highly differing in terms of numbers, shares, duration and growth rates according to different urban contexts. To facilitate such initiatives, an enabling, innovative and fostering local policy framework is necessary, allowing for constructive interaction with local politics and administration. Barriers include still widespread sector thinking instead of following cross-sectoral interdisciplinary strategies, being one of the causes for an existing implementation gap.

Keywords:

citizen participation, civil society, urban spaces, local governance, self-organisation, social innovation, socio-ecological transition, urban green commons

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