

Civil society and opportunities for future landscape development

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Abstract: Civic engagement in different sectors such as geriatric care or environmental protection is a common phenomenon of today's society. The opportunities of voluntary collective activities for the maintenance of man-made landscape have got little attention from research so far. Traditional agricultural landscapes are of great value not only for the Austrian tourism, but also for local residents. Civic engagement could support their maintenance. Within a PhD- project, which started in March 2007, national and international practice examples of civic engagement for landscape stewardship are identified and selective case studies are analysed in more detail. The research interest covers the types of initiatives, their organisational and institutional background, as well as the motives, incentives and benefits of the involved volunteers. In a transdisciplinary research design, local stakeholders of Lower Austrian communities are closely involved in order to identify and maybe even set-up conditions for successful implementation of such civil society initiatives. This paper presents the research design and first, preliminary results.

Keywords: landscape stewardship, civil society, voluntary action, best-practice, Austria

Introduction

Agricultural abandonment, new tourism and leisure activities and sub-urbanisation are only some of the pressures that shape and transform traditional landscapes in Austria and in many other parts of Europe. In the context of unwelcome landscape change, different questions arise: How does the local population react on these developments? Who will take over responsibility? What kind of (new) approaches and mechanisms do work?

Apart from state coordinated programmes or legal regulations and market-based mechanisms, such as labels or entrance fees, civil society engagement promises an effective and context-sensitive way of landscape stewardship (Hodge, 2001; Hodge 2007). Civil society groups provide platforms for dedicated personalities who invest personal time and resources, which are capable of inspiring and carrying along others with ideas and activities to counteract unwelcome landscape degradation.

This paper is outcome of an inter- and transdisciplinary PhD-project that analyses the opportunities of voluntary collective action for landscape development. The main research objective is to find out more about the organisational and institutional background of such initiatives, the motives, incentives and benefits of volunteers and the conditions for successful implementation. In the reminder of this paper, we outline the research design of the PhD-project and present first, preliminary results.

Research design, material and methods

The project is structured in two parts: firstly, the analysis of (inter-)national practice examples and secondly, a transdisciplinary communication process with local actors of Lower Austria. The national and international practice examples for civic engagement in landscape stewardship are identified by literature and internet analysis and expert interviews. These examples include projects, associations or groups that support agricultural cultivation and landscape stewardship, e.g. scything Alpine grassland. The collected examples are described, systemised and compared along a catalogue of different criteria. From this compilation, examples for in-depth case studies will be chosen. Apart from the analysis of written documents such as project concepts or statutes of registered associations, qualitative interviews with volunteers will be the main method for data collection. These interviews will particularly focus on institutional mechanisms, motives, incentives and benefits of the voluntary engagement. The second, transdisciplinary part of the project will take place in one or more

municipalities of Lower Austria. With a "Future Workshop" or similar moderation techniques, local actors should be mobilised for a discussion process on their landscape and the valuation of (inter-)national best-practice examples for civic landscape engagement. A final synthesis of the results of both project parts should provide recommendations for civil society organisations, rural development programmes and other relevant policies that could create favourable conditions for civic engagement.

First result

The first, preliminary results from internet analysis, literature review and expert interviews with scientists and planners, reveal that civil society engagement is a nascent topic for both, landscape research as well as practical landscape and rural development. In Austria, we can make out single attempts from planners to foster and initiate civil society activities for landscape stewardship. So far, there is no coordinated scientific approach or political reaction on this form of civic engagement. From national and international practice examples, two main target groups can be identified: on the one hand, local clubs and associations taking care for their local landscapes. For example, in the community of Sattel in Switzerland civic engagement is already acknowledged in the local landscape development concept. The inhabitants do not only participate in the development of the concept, they are also motivated to take over responsibility on a voluntary basis (www.sattel.ch/web/lek_juni.pdf). On the other hand, we can find non-locals working as volunteers. This kind of civil services are generally coordinated by intermediary organisations. A global player within this group is "Willing Workers On Organic Farms" (www.woofing.org), that places volunteers on farms all over the world. An other organisation in South Tyrol is 'bergbauernhilfe.it'. Both groups, local people and non-locals are driven by the same mission, which seems worth exploring in more detail in the ongoing PhD-project. There is empirical evidence on the motivations of volunteers in different sectors of civic engagement (e.g. Hwang et al., 2005), but so far no literature on the motivation of civic engagement, in the form of voluntary actions, in landscape stewardship can be identified. Further research is also needed on the organizational and institutional mechanisms governing civic landscape engagement.

Discussion

The fact that most beneficiaries of rural landscapes and their recreational, ecological and aesthetical values, do not invest so much time or effort into the maintenance and development, turns them into a possible target group for future voluntary responsibility. In order to get more actors involved in landscape stewardship, it is necessary to know more about the organisational background of existing civil society initiatives, and about the incentives and motives of their members. With this knowledge it is possible to support future initiatives by awareness building, education, political programmes or rural development funds.

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