

Exploring social innovation in green spaces governance across European cities

Special session : Urban Sustainability Transitions : Actors, Resources, Indicators

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. This shift has to take place within a limited time frame.

In Europe land is a finite and shrinking resource because of land use changes that are mostly and increasingly marked by land consumption to the detriment of agricultural land due to increasing urbanization with concomitant growing urban sprawl. Therefore, across European cities, the use of urban green spaces is highly controversial and subject to diverging interests, yielding a high conflict potential. The persistence of the economic growth logic manifests itself in ongoing city over-mineralization and continuing urban sprawl due to infrastructure and building development pressure threatening existing green spaces.

Yet, preserving the availability of bio-diverse green spaces is crucial for the socio-ecological transition of cities since apart from offering recreational opportunities for city dwellers, they provide indispensable ecological benefits such as reducing noise, cleaning the air, providing a habitat for plant and animal species and mitigating local vulnerability in the face of extreme climate events.

In this context the access to and the re-claiming of urban 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.

There is a growing academic and policy discourse about probabilities of and barriers to socio-ecological transition. While long-term goals seem to be clear, the way to these goals is discussed controversially. In this regard a growing research interest around the role of social innovation for the transition has emerged. It is argued that social innovation plays a key role in the economic and social development of European cities (Moulaert 2000) and that a self-organised management of commons beyond state and market forces is possible (Ostrom 2007). Yet, looking more specifically at public green spaces as common property across European cities, the role of citizen participation / civil society's self-organisation in their governance remains under-researched.

Against this background, this 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 the local level.

This research is embedded in 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 », which delivered the analysed data. The project seeks to elaborate a development strategy for a more dynamic, inclusive and sustainable Europe, and area five particularly explores the role of regions and cities in the socio-ecological transition.

This research investigates from a comparative case study approach, if and under what conditions civil society's self-organisation is a transition driver in the field of green spaces in European cities. With this end in mind two questions need to be answered :

- How can citizen groups contribute to maintaining existing green spaces which are available and accessible for all and which should be expanded whilst assuring biodiversity and providing for a diversity of uses for local needs (re-creation, community-based food-production, neighbourhood culture, cross-generational and intercultural learning, etc.) at the same time ?
- Which policy framework allows for constructive collaboration between local policy makers and administration, economic actors and citizens, enabling innovative solutions in the field of green spaces governance, urban food production and participative urban development ?

This research aims at

- providing a deepened analysis of actors, processes and contributions of citizen-driven activities within green space governance and urban food production in European cities,
- to present 'best practice' examples and to identify institutional conditions under which they have evolved in order to prepare replicability elsewhere and
- to direct the attention of research and policy-makers to civil society actors who play an important role in initiating and sustaining processes of transition across European cities in order to create improved framework conditions for their involvement.

In a mixed method approach the qualitative data stemming from 55 interviews from 29 cities (1-4 interviews per city) in 14 countries conducted with actors from politics/administration (N=7), the business sector (N=21) and civil society (N=27) are analysed and interpreted with the help of qualitative content analysis. The procedure is based on a coding system, emanating from Ostrom's framework for analysing a socio-ecological system (Ostrom 2007).

Interview results will be triangulated with the quantitative questionnaire results filled in by the same actors as well as with a case study report for each city, portraying the respective state of socio-ecological transition through the eyes of the field researcher.

The data reveals that solutions relying solely on state and market actors are insufficient to solve problems of ecological resilience and further ecological and social outcomes of the resource system green spaces and meet high obstacles in times of scarce public resources. They must be complemented with diverse forms of local self-organised and co-operative civil society bottom-up movements and participation in the governance of green spaces, also to counter the tendency of privatisation of public land due to high expected profit rates. Such movements emerge across European cities to tackle local challenges, yet highly differ in terms of numbers, shares, duration and growth rates according to different urban contexts. Important tasks, previously accomplished by public authorities, are voluntarily taken over by civil society (citizens/associations) and in some cases by business actors, alleviating the public budget and sometimes mitigating private poverty at the same time (e.g. by the increasing movement of using urban commons productively for urban food production). Grass-roots movements such as urban gardening have proven that people are able to cooperate, to organise themselves, to take over responsibility for green spaces and even to introduce new practices that support the socio-ecological transition, showing that self-organised management of green spaces in cooperation with or beyond state and market forces is possible.

Whereas in the majority of cities these are still niche projects, in a minority they have become active players in green space governance, meeting public authorities at eye level and cooperating with a wide range of actors. Yet, in all cities responsibility for local green space governance remains with city authorities on whose cooperation self-organised actors are highly dependent to scale up successful bottom-up actions.

These activities contribute to the functioning and well-being of a European society aiming for sustainability, yet still encounter numerous barriers like wide-spread sector thinking instead of following cross-sectoral interdisciplinary strategies, being one of the causes for an existing implementation gap.

To facilitate such initiatives, an enabling, innovative and fostering local policy framework is necessary, allowing for constructive interaction with local politics and administration. Cities that manage to include, e.g. via citizens participation, a wide range of stakeholders in governance are most advanced in the transition and can be described as 'Learning Cities', allowing innovative experiments that are only scaled up, if successful on the small scale.

Bibliography :

Elsen, Susanne (ed.) (2011): *Ökosoziale Transformation. Solidarische Ökonomie und die Gestaltung des Gemeinwesens. Perspektiven und Ansätze von unten*. Münchener Hochschulschriften für Angewandte Sozialwissenschaften. Neu-Ulm: AG Spak.

Jackson, Tim (2009) : *Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet*. Oxon/New York : Earthscan.

Löw, Martina (2001) : *Raumsoziologie*. Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp.

Mayring, Philipp (2010): *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

Moulaert, Frank (2000): *Globalization and integrated area development in European cities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ostrom, Elinor (2007): A diagnostic approach for going beyond panaceas. In: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 104 (39), 15181-15187.

Seyfang, Gill/Smith, Adrian (2007): Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: Towards a new research and policy agenda. In: *Environmental Politics*, vol. 16 (4), 584-603.

WBGU (German Advisory Council on Global Change) (2011): *Flagship Report. World in Transition. A Social Contract for Sustainability*. Berlin.