

Biosphere Reserves as stimuli for participatory local governance? Conceptual frame and initial results of a research project

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Abstract

It's widely agreed that UNESCO Biosphere Reserves aim to provide contexts in which local citizens may participate in decision-making processes. This focus not only forms a central piece of the sustainability concept, but also constitutes a core element of Biosphere Reserve governance according to UNESCO's Seville Strategy of 1995. The MAB-funded research project BIOS PARTIZIP looks at the ways in which local citizens get involved in regional processes and shape local decision-making. The governance arrangement through which locals usually get involved in these processes is "networks". Which networks interact under the umbrella of Biosphere Reserves? Are there any local citizens who try to influence local decision-making processes through regional discourse? How central is their network capital to these processes? These questions pinpoint the project's central assumption: deliberative good local governance practices that meet Seville Strategy requirements need a certain degree of network capital and civic commitment on the part of local citizens. How present and how strong is such behaviour in Biosphere Reserve communities? What are the actions local citizens take when it comes to influencing both regional development processes and patterns of discursive local politics in Biosphere Reserves?

Keywords

regional & local governance in Biosphere Reserves, sustainability, networks, participation, qualitative network analysis

Aims and duration of the project

The central focus of the research project is on governance processes in the Wienerwald (Vienna Woods) Biosphere Reserve, Austria. Like some other Biosphere Reserves, Vienna Woods was established in close inter-communal cooperation between local communities, non-governmental organisations and civil society. This process was participative to the extent that it brought together landowners and communities to get their consent (see LANGE 2005). Hence stakeholders from local communities and local associations interacted in such a way as to ensure that a Biosphere Reserve could take hold in the Vienna Woods region (see LACKNER & LOISKANDL 2007). According to Seville Strategy criteria, this new regional context is supposed to provide locals with an opportunity of participating in regional and local decision-making processes to further the goal of regional sustainability throughout the entire Biosphere Reserve (see LANGE 2005; COY & WEIXLBAUMER 2007; KÖCK & LANGE 2007; STOLL-KLEEMANN & WELP 2008). Can we identify patterns of civic engagement and networking with a regional context with the aim of influencing local decision-making processes on the part of local citizens in Biosphere Wienerwald? And if yes: How does this process function? What are the basic components that keep it alive?

Allowing more participation in decision-making processes was one of the central ideas of the 1992 Rio-Conference of UNCED (see GRUNWALD & KOPFMÜLLER 2006; BARANEK & WALK 2005; BRAND & FÜRST 2002). Future-oriented processes and decisions need the participation of those concerned: the local citizens. To this end, however, Local Agenda 21 initiatives have already and evidently proven successful (see DANGSCHAT 2004). This broader understanding of the sustainability concept was also implemented by UNESCO's *Man and Biosphere Programme*. According to the Seville Strategy, new Biosphere Reserves have to embark upon participative planning, management and decision-making in both the planning and the management aspects of their daily operation (see STOLL-KLEEMANN & WELP 2008; COY & WEIXLBAUMER 2007). Instead of measuring collective involvement in locally institutionalised decision-making processes, the project puts a strong emphasis on voluntary forms of participation: a civic engagement that pinpoints actively involved persons within local communities (see ZIMMER 2007). Thus it is assumed that participatory processes in Biosphere Reserves heavily depend upon voluntary support in the frameworks of their constantly changing networks.

The project itself started in November 2008 and receives funding from the Austrian Man and Biosphere Programme for a time-period of two years. It intends to trace central difficulties that Biosphere Reserves as regional settings have to face in the realm of participation requirements. The research project is based on FOUCAULT's (2000) assumption that power is "in the process" and will provide Biosphere Reserve managers, local decision-makers and citizens with pieces of process-oriented advice on how network power and influence on political discourse can be exercised to ensure positive impacts on sustainable development. Furthermore, it cooperates with the large research project "Participation Processes in Biosphere Reserves" to obtain a number of crucial benefits in areas where research focuses overlap. Contributing to scientific discourse, an initial publication and a final report seek to draw together and interpret new pieces knowledge on the topic.

Methods

As far as methods are concerned, the project embarks upon an inductive approach that measures participative and discursive network practices of local citizens – understood as "experts" (see FISCHER 2003) with an entirely participative research design. A first workshop with locals from Tullnerbach focused on perception and role definition within the context of a Biosphere Reserve. What do the participants of this workshop know about this regional context? Have they got into contact with the Biosphere Reserve? How do they perceive their role within this new context? And how does this role fit with the roles they take on in their daily routines? A short research questionnaire completed this first round of the survey. Building on the knowledge gathered in this first round, the second workshop will try to steer and measure the networking of the locals involved. This workshop will be subjected to evaluation, too. Taken together, both workshops focus on a qualitative process analysis of participation that consists of participative workshops with local citizens of the chosen Wienerwald-community Tullnerbach. In addition, guided interviews with a number of regional stakeholders from Rhön and Entlebuch Biosphere Reserves will complete the field study and enrich it with a comparative perspective. It is expected that a hypothesis can be derived from the field study. A Delphi survey with Vienna Woods Biosphere Reserve locals will then review the validity of the hypothesis. All in all, the central target of this deliberative research design is raising information on local citizens' discourse and networking activities and the extent to which this influences local politics.

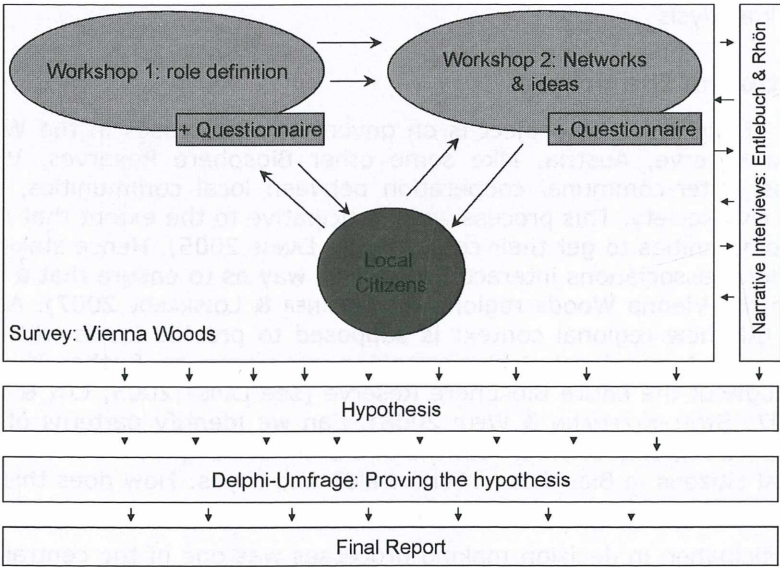


Figure 1: The Methodological Setting

Initial results

As data from the first round suggests, civic engagement that links with the Biosphere Reserve and seeks to influence local politics clearly exists. A central obstacle to becoming more deeply involved in this process is the clearly identifiable lack of information on the part of locals. Nevertheless, local residents tend to see the Biosphere Reserve as an opportunity for deepening civic engagement in their communities. Thus some citizens came up with new ideas for their commune, too.

Discussion

At present, there is some evidence to suggest that locals can significantly influence local politics through getting involved in regional sustainability networks such as Biosphere Reserves. It remains the central targets of this research project to find out why and how that is the case.

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