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Социология и социальная работа

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Bunte Wiese Tübingen - A case study of good practices in local governance of urban greening

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Аннотация. Student initiatives act as social innovators by using academic expertise to tackle societal issues practically. The University of Tübingen appears as a fertile ground in that respect, with the creation of the Initiative Bunte Wiese in 2010, that works jointly with the municipality to promote sustainable management practices of urban green spaces. This paper investigates practices and challenges encountered by Bunte Wiese in conducting its community work. It aims at identifying the variables influencing the organization's ability to effectively promote biodiversity preservation locally. The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews carried out with one former activist as well as two current members of Bunte Wiese, and with an employee from the gardening service of the municipality. Themes arising from the discussions were used to define the main variables weighting on the Initiative's decision-making power. Seven categories were defined, among which four components related to proactively deployed means. Structural factors, including internal factors of the organization, comanagement issues, and the external context were also identified. The steady conduction of public relations work and the awareness of the changing external environment appear to be key dimensions that might be generalized as guidelines for the success of similar initiatives.

Ключевые слова: student initiative, local governance, urban green spaces, co-management, public relations, external context, organizational factors

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INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on a student initiative involved in the management of municipal green spaces. The management of urban meadows is a policy domain in its own right in the city of Tübingen, meaning that this area is characterized by specific policy arrangements between state-based and community actors [Arts, Leroy, Van Tatenhove, 2006: 99]. As opposed to public-private and private-social partnerships, respectively involving the cooperation between state and market actors, and between market and community actors, decision-making power within the framework of urban grassland planning in Tübingen is partly shared by civil-society based actors and the authorities, that is, in a so-called logic of comanagement [Lemos, Agraval, 2006: 310]. This paper focuses on the initiative “Bunte Wiese Tübingen”, a mini-NGO aiming at protecting the diversity of species within green spaces at the local level. The goal is to observe how the initiative interacts with the public and with the authorities in charge of green spaces and infrastructure maintenance (Stadtgärtnerei) dealing with constraints. Namely, Bunte Wiese needs to foster acceptance among local stakeholders and performs its activity in a changing environment: the fact that its members - mostly students - leave Tübingen after their graduation notably adversely influences its manpower. Moreover, its core activity can be affected by the local political agenda, among other contingencies. I aim at observing how well Bunte Wiese manages to assert itself

in local policymaking, as multilevel governance in the field of environment has gained importance [Foo, 2018: 69] and because universities are assumed to be progressive and visible actors [Hagemann, Meisch, 2014].

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

I carried out a qualitative case study based on semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews. The goal is to understand why and when some practices are deployed. Prof. Dr. Oliver Betz (R1), a core member of the Initiative, was the first respondent. Sanja Drohm (R2), a “junior” active member of the organization was the second interviewee. I then contacted Uwe Behrendt (R3), from the city gardening service, who closely works with the initiative. I finally conducted an interview with Dr. Philipp Unterweger (R4), who is a former member of Bunte Wiese and works as a biodiversity consultant [Unsere Partner]. Seven relevant dimensions were identified throughout the interviews, which correspond to variables affecting Bunte Wiese’s ability to perform as a contributor to local decision-making. These components relate to methods developed to foster acceptance by the public, and to contextual and structural elements. The following table outlines a summary of the interviewees’ statements regarding factors and practices impacting in the Bunte Wiese’s ability to play its part in the local biodiversity governance.

	R1	R2	R3	R4
Academic added value	X	O	X	X
Research about public perception	X	O	O	X
Public relations work	X	X	X	X
Networking	O	X	O	X
Internal factors of the organization	O	X	O	X
Comanagement issues	X	X	X	X
External factors	X	X	X	X

KEY: x = matters strongly ; o = less significant/not stated

Table 1. Core factors for impacting local biodiversity governance

Under *academic added value*, I include knowledge production as a valuable input provided by Bunte Wiese to policymakers. Knowledge production is seen by most respondents as a key lever to be perceived as a credible actor in decision-making by the authorities (R1, R3, R4). As highlighted by the first interviewee, academic research is an important support tool for the municipality. *Research about public perception* refers to the academic work done by the initiative in order to anticipate and to assess the acceptance of its actions by the general public. The category *Public relations work* corresponds to the communication strategies deployed in order for the measures undertaken by Bunte Wiese to resonate positively in the public sphere. This category can be viewed as a practical component derived from the previously mentioned dimension, and includes written and oral communication tools (brochures, signs, use of social networks, thematic presentations and advising). Intercultural communication is also regarded as an important channel to foster broader acceptance (R4). The presence in local journals and on local TV channels also fuels the Initiative's resonance in the general public (R1, R2). *Networking* includes the geographical and sectoral expansion of the Bunte Wiese model. This includes the establishment of sister initiatives in cities such as Potsdam, Würzburg, Göttingen and Berlin [Interview 1 with Prof. Dr. Oliver Betz]. One can also distinguish between proactive networking (R2, R4) and indirect networking (R1, R2). Positive spillover effects are to be observed in both cases. One of the interviewees notably indicated that practices developed by Bunte Wiese in a specific city were likely to inspire sister initiatives. For instance, “Bunte Wiese Stuttgart” initiates actions within schools. Reciprocally, the Tübinger initiative started expanding its emphasis on research and tips for the community to sporadic actions directed toward children (R2). Indirect networking is done through the training of future workers who, after

leaving the initiative, instill the Bunte Wiese culture in their professional life (R1, R2, R4). *Internal factors of the organization* refer to hindrances and opportunities derived from the attractivity, the size, the field of activity, the (lack of) academic diversity of the members of the initiative. For instance, interviewees highlighted the need for implementing an incentive-based system to attract potential recruits (e.g. with the help of credit points for students) (R1, R4). The topic *Comanagement* was approached from the angle of the joint implementation work between the mini-NGO and the city. Respondents agreed upon the fact that a mix of frequent formal and informal talks as well as a bottom-up implementation model create good conditions for collaboration (R1, R3). Among the *External factors* mentioned, respondents unanimously consider the general socio-political context as an important variable influencing Bunte Wiese's ability to conduct its actions, even in a small-scale governance setting: political decisions (e.g., federal White Book on the Green City), the pandemic and biology scholars' swing of interest from biodiversity preservation topics to vaccines, student turnover in the city of Tübingen notably affect the initiative (R1, R2, R3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What emerges from the narratives is that steady public relations work is seen by the small student initiative as an inevitable practice. *External context* appears to be the variable weighting on the Initiative that is the most often mentioned. The largest number of diverging statements are to be observed within the dimension *Internal factors of the organization*. Indeed, when asked about the need for expanding the initiative in terms of size and status (association), current members highlighted potential disadvantages to such structural changes (R1, R2) while one of the former members mentioned the fact that this issue was more a matter of *ability* rather than a question of *willingness*. He also assessed the attractivity of the Initiative in a more critical way than current members, especially regarding the issue of getting people from different academic backgrounds aboard (R4). One needs to carefully consider why some of the respondents might have insisted on or be more guarded regarding some topics. For instance, interviewees on the Initiative's side twice highlighted the room for improvement in terms of urban surface coverage and the willingness to be called for collaboration on additional environmental topics. Yet, this issue was not mentioned on the gardening service's side. One also needs to remember that Bunte Wiese has some characteristics of a pressure group, by advocating for more resources deployed for biodiversity preservation, and inevitably intends to assert its claims among other public interests. Furthermore, the different positions occupied by the respondents outside and within the initiative might influence their discourse.

Following theoretical implications can be derived from this case study feasible in other governance contexts for small scale student initiatives can be defined. One can notably distinguish between the setting in which the organization evolves, and the means deployed to assert itself. The setting is composed of the internal infrastructure inhibiting or facilitating the actions of the organization, the co-management type gradually built and adjusted by way of exchanges with the local government, and the external context that partly condition public acceptance as well as the ability for the organization to expand itself. Furthermore, other dimensions identified relate to practices that are proactively deployed by the organization to lobby for its cause. One can derive normative guidelines from the case of Bunte Wiese, some of the practices having greater resonance when steadily "updated" or set up upstream from decision-making: scientific research about the public resonance of the organization's action appears to be a necessary effort to avoid rejection from the citizens. Then, public relations work via various media must be continuously done. On the side of the local government, student initiatives constantly need to be perceived as credible advisors and not solely as academic representatives that use common resources for the sake of research in biology. Networking is also likely to generate positive externalities.

A couple of limits need to be outlined in the process of generalizing the results. As interviews were conducted within a single unit synchronically and over a short period of time, this

study provides a picture of the initiative in a very particular context. Besides, the action of Bunte Wiese not only concerns municipal grasslands but also spaces managed by the Land. Yet no interview was carried out with representatives from the Vermögen und Bau BW office of Tübingen. Surveying the citizens about their perception of biodiversity preservation with the help of short questionnaires might also have been of interest to triangulate the findings. Furthermore, Bunte Wiese Tübingen works on ecological issues within green spaces in a German region where academic institutions are relatively well esteemed. Thus, one should perform complementary studies to extrapolate these findings in a helpful way for other small NGOs with academic ties.

NOTES

Interview 1 with Prof. Dr. Oliver Betz, 06.07.2021, Interviewee was happy to be quoted and attributed

Interview 2 with Ms. Sanja Drohm, 26.07.2021, Interviewee was happy to be quoted and attributed

Interview 3 with Mr. Uwe Behrendt, 16.08.2021, Interviewee was happy to be quoted and attributed

Interview 4 with Dr. Philipp Unterweger, 20.08.2021, Interviewee was happy to be quoted and attributed

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Sociology and social work

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Bunte Wiese Tübingen - A case study of good practices in local governance of urban greening

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