Regional management is social work! Activating social capital as a key task of regional managers – the case of the Biosphere Reserve Wienerwald

FALK F. BORSDORF

Introduction

Allowing locals to play a more participatory role in decision-making processes was one of the central ideas of the 1992 Rio Conference of UNCED (Brand & Fürst 2002; Meadowcroft 2004). Future-oriented processes and decisions require the participation of those most immediately affected: the local citizens. As regards encouraging public participation, Local Agenda 21 initiatives are a success (Dangschat 2004). This broader understanding of the sustainability concept, i.e. that grassroots participation is an important aspect of sustainable governance, was also implemented by the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme. According to the Seville Strategy, new biosphere reserves have to embark upon participative planning, management and decision-making in both the planning phases and in their daily operation. (Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008). Instead of measuring collective involvement in locally institutionalized decision-making processes, the project puts a strong emphasis on voluntary forms of participation: civic engagement that pinpoints actively involved persons within local communities.

As we know from a variety of regional development processes, citizens' voluntary engagement in local projects often fizzles out unless rigorously supported and facilitated by an institutional framework. In most cases, the regional management boards of certain regional entities such as biosphere reserves take on this facilitative role. Overall, the relationships between locals, their environment and their government institutions need to be transformed into a paradigm in which locals actively shape their social and cultural environments (Fürst et al. 2006; Lahner 2009). In long-term relations between actors from local and regional government institutions, actively involved local citizens, people from civil society organizations, scientists/consultants, and private enterprises, there are frequent changes in the objectives, wishes and spatial requirements of the individual parties concerned. But while most of these actors have an interest in the success of this venture, the benefits of active involvement in these proceedings often appear less

obvious to local citizens. Participation consumes their time and final decisions are made elsewhere (in the government institutions).

As argued in this paper, activating social capital and encouraging locals as "active citizens" remains one of the main challenges for regional management planning in consultation of the public. Locals need to be motivated to bring their ideas to bear in a participatory process and to actually turn up at meetings. Especially in the case of biosphere reserves, a more intense involvement or activation of citizens will be necessary to claim their social-space dimension. After a brief introduction into the meaning of activation, social capital and participation in biosphere reserves, this article will shed light on central findings of a research project conducted in the Vienna Woods region and funded by the Austrian Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme. Conclusions will focus on how links between science and practice can be used more effectively in this regard.

Activating social capital – a central task for biosphere reserves management

Activating the participatory resources of local citizens becomes a necessity once the successful implementation of sustainable regional development is the declared aim. According to Robert Putnam (2000), resources activation aims to build social capital, which by definition: "(…) refers to the features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency by facilitating coordinated action" (Putnam 2000: 19). As such, social capital has a certain function, consists of a certain social structure, and facilitates "(…) certain actions of individuals who are within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence" (Coleman 1990: 302). This special resource, which combines trust, norms and networks with a certain function and social structure (Jungbauer-Gans 2006), promises tangible benefits for improving the social dimension of a

Falk F. Borsdorf

biosphere reserve: not only network governance, but also trust and norms are important if participatory processes are to succeed in these regions.

By emphasizing bottom-up processes, however, the Seville Strategy assumes a participation paradise that in most instances does not mirror the reality in biosphere reserves (Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008). Without the invitation of regional managers, turnout for participatory meetings would be significantly lower and meetings would run in a less structured manner. In the worst case, these consultations would not even yield any applicable results that biosphere reserve managers could implement in their policies and strategies. As a research project in the BR Wienerwald has shown, intense efforts were necessary to contact locals and get them to the workshop sessions (Jungmeier et al. 2009). The entirety of these measures and techniques can be termed activation.

Much in the sense of Mead (1934), activation means facilitating the "active self" of a human being, i.e. the potentials to direct one's own life rather than merely living it. Harshly criticized by leading social scientists (Bröckling 2007), this norm has become perhaps one the most important components of capitalism (Lessenich 2009; Rosa 2009). The active self is a normative demand inasmuch as it portrays a number of self and social techniques that enable us to readjust our lifestyles to the model of entrepreneurship. It assembles a variety of rules governing how we should act and behave. An active self is not something that one simply *is*, but is something one must *become*. We are never active enough (Bröckling 2007; Rosa 2009). Activation is designed to help us find and sustain the active self in ourselves. It aims to enable us to act as if we were all entrepreneurs.

Applied in the context of activating social capital within regional development processes in BRs, it means getting locals to the point in which they actually are – as Putnam (2000) held – "smarter, healthier, safer, richer and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (Putnam 2000: 290). Obviously, these changes are embedded in social developments within the country where they are taking place. The model of the active self

Fig. 1: Participatory workshops with local citizens of a Vienna Woods community. Source of photograph: Daniel Zollner.

constitutes the main social norm for almost all aspects of human life in democratic western society (Bröckling 2007). And it is almost impossible to escape this demand in the field of consultations on sustainable regional development processes.

In the overall context of regional development processes, activation is primarily concerned with one question: who participates? It focuses on the persons invited to regional participation meetings and whether they participated in them. Furthermore, it connects with questions of inclusion and exclusion. The inclusion and activation of all inhabitants of a region must be considered impossible, especially in larger settings like the BR Wienerwald. Hence, bigger BRs have to select participants and invite them directly to workshop sessions. As comparative research into participation processes in BRs has shown, it is important to avoid creating obligations (Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008). Locals who turn up because they feel obliged are not what biosphere reserves managers should look for. Sustainable development processes require active citizens.

Activating social capital

With 51 municipalities in Lower Austria and seven Viennese districts, the BR Wienerwald is the largest Austrian BR. Extending over an area of 105 645 hectares, the BR includes the forest areas of the Vienna Woods as well as a large proportion of grasslands. The total area is divided into three zones along an intensity of use scale: core areas with absolute environmental protection of 5 576 hectares, buffer zones around them make up 19 840 hectares. 80 229 hectares of transitional areas constitute the third part, indicating the regional managements' focus on regional development. UNESCO gave the BR Wienerwald its designation in 2005. Until recently, the BR underwent an institutionalization and consolidation process that did not require too much public involvement. Preliminary attempts at setting up participatory committees have proven successful (Lange 2005; Köck et al. 2009). Broader success of regional development processes will require the activation of social capital and intensified networking in the regions' communities. The BR has to be tied to the hearts and minds of its local population.

As mentioned before, a research project on participation processes in BRs focused on improving governance processes and initiating more public support for the new regional context. Participatory workshops with local citizens of a Vienna Woods community were conducted in this style to gauge how aware citizens were of the BR and what role-models existed at local level (Fig. 1). The project applied a transdisciplinary research approach to measuring the discursive dimension of the BR's operation in the community. BR managers, members of local civil society organizations and locals with no direct attachment to either local politics or the BR were to discuss the BR. How did they perceive the newly developed regional context? Were they aware of the opportunities inherent in such a setting? What did officials know about citizens' roles within the community? Which of these roles fit with requirements of a BR?

Two workshops aimed at assessing and (if possible) improving social capital in one of the regions' communities were planned and conducted. Tullnerbach – a municipality 15 km west of Vienna – was chosen as the meeting site. The idea was to invite a group of sixteen people from three parts of society: four members of the "Gemeinderat" (local council) of Tullnerbach, four civil society activists, and eight local residents. These Tullnerbach locals were invited by letter and telephone. Additionally, one of the local politicians helped these efforts by talking to every single one of the intended participants before the actual date of the workshop.

One of the elements explored in the first workshop was motivation. What motivated locals to take part in a BR's participation process? What did they think they could contribute to the community in this respect? What did they perceive as the key areas of responsibility of the regional management? A first round of discussion led to three themes to focus on: information & public relations, awareness-raising and networks & cooperation. Each of these issues was connected to coordinates with the importance of action by regional managers on the X axis and that of individual action by locals on the Y axis. Workshop participants were asked to express their motivation and preference by sticking a dot into each of these coordinates. A result long on the X axis and short on the Y axis meant that the participants interpreted that theme as being more in the hands of regional managers, while high values on the Y axis and low values on the X axis would signal that locals could see themselves taking the lead here (Fig. 2).

First results

The results of these tests (see Fig. 2) were quite striking with respect to motivation and active selves involved in participation processes of a BR:
- *information / public relations:* although two participants saw themselves as more responsible for spreading information on the BR within their community, most others wanted to see a more balanced approach in this regard by attributing the same values to both axes. Interestingly, none of the participants

thought that information and public relations was an issue only the BR management should deal with.

- *knowledge transfer/awareness-raising:* here too, the workshop participants wanted to see a balance between individual engagement and efforts of BR managers. While one participant viewed the collective level as slightly more important here, two others were sure that their own undertakings were of considerable importance within these processes. Again, two other Tullnerbach locals found that a balanced approach with both actively engaged individuals and committed BR managers was vital if awareness-raising should lead to a more efficient implementation of the BR's central issues.
- *networks & cooperation:* not surprisingly, the workshop participants thought that BR managers had more to contribute to successful networking and cooperation-building in the Vienna Woods region. Three stakeholders expressed their willingness to make substantial contributions and put their dots into a balanced position between X and Y axe. None of those present at the workshop thought that networking was his/her own responsibility.

While all three categories refer to activating social capital at local level (to achieve more public involvement in regional development processes), the last one points directly at this necessity. Networks and cooperation are at the centre of social capital theory (Jungbauer-Gans 2006; Putnam 2000). And the results of this motivation analysis clearly showed that the challenge of activating these resources within local communities rests in the hands of regional managers.

Nevertheless, regional managers have to bear in mind special features of their country's social structure and political culture. According to Ulram (2000), political culture in Austria falls into the category of a culture of subjects (on the old scale of Almond & Verba 1963), which means that Austrians have sound knowledge of political developments in their country and positive feelings for their government but abstain from taking advantage of existing input structures the politi-
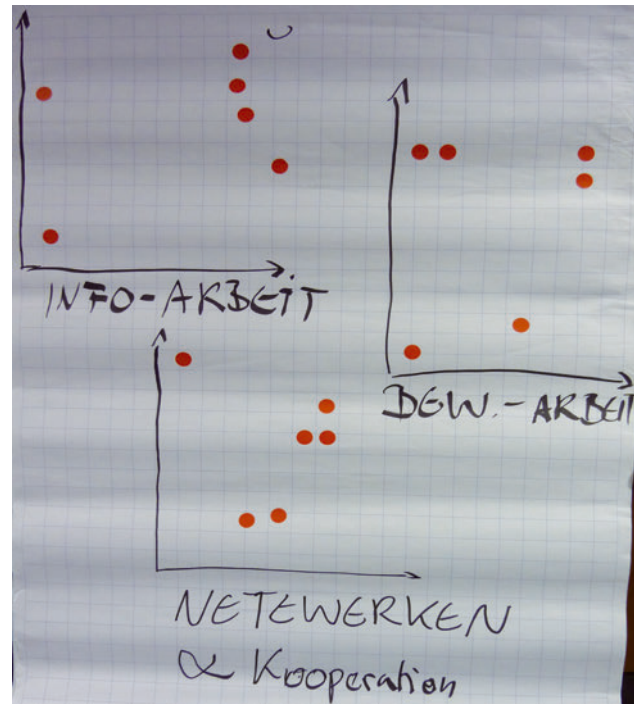

Fig. 2: Coordinates of action needed by locals or BR management.

cal system offers (Ulram 2000). Hence the activation of Tullnerbach locals and their social capital needs to occur in unfavourable circumstances. Given the less-than-participatory social background, the first workshop in Tullnerbach enjoyed satisfactory attendance rates. Two out of four local politicians and two out of four civil society activists paid their respects to the project team by attending at the workshop, while the attendance rate was even higher among the local citizens group, where 5 out of 6 persons accepted our invitations.

A central obstacle to democratic regional development processes is the existence of "problem groups" with respect to participation, an issue for which we have found no reliable and practicable solution (Zumaglini 2007). In most instances, these groups are women, the socially unprivileged, adolescents and people from immigrant families (Walter & Rosenberger 2007). It is a fact that, "At home, in school, on the job and in voluntary organizations and religious institutions, individuals acquire resources, receive requests for activity and develop the political orientations that foster participation"

(Burns et al. 2001: 35). Activating these resources requires concrete programmes for, and targeted communication with, members of these groups (Oedl-Wieser 2010). Participant lists for workshops and consultations must ensure that enough members of problem groups participate.

Taking gender equality in workshops at the local level, much needs to be done to motivate women to participate. Within the project mentioned above, though, invitations and subsequent motivations addressed equal numbers of men and women. Nevertheless, only half of the women invited to the first workshop (4 out of 8) actually attended the first workshop. In the second workshop, any pretence of gender equality was lost: not a single woman came to the meeting. Regional managers will have to keep this in mind and act accordingly. Methods borrowed from social work – such as community intervention – could help to motivate more people to participate in workshop sessions. One idea discussed is to talk to the women invited before actually scheduling the meetings, or to talk to them about the meeting in advance.

Conclusion

In many respects, we can conclude that activating the social capital of locals, making them "active self"-oriented persons, is an important task for regional managers in developing the social space dimension of their BR. Research in the BR Wienerwald underlines that locals are indeed prepared to get more deeply involved in the fields of information / public relations and knowledge transfer / awareness-raising, while networks & cooperation is perceived as "the BR's business". This is interesting because it directly expresses the necessity of activating social capital on the part of regional BR managers.

Leaving aside discussions on participation and democracy on a wider scale (i. e. questions like: does participation always make sense?), regional managers will always have to acknowledge the special social struc-

ture and political culture of the region. Preparation for workshops has to reflect that to ensure participation. The BR Wienerwald in Austria, for instance, is situated in a country with a "culture of subjects" attitude among its citizens. This aspect is completely different from some other countries that host BRs. Nevertheless, regional managers should aim to involve a variety of different people from the community into their participative meetings to make sure that outcomes work for a wide range of individuals and groups within society.

In conclusion, we hold that it is important for BR managers to activate social capital at local level. This activation needs to involve a wide range of stakeholders into the decision-making processes. Not only does the EC's White Paper on European Governance call for openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence in all decision-making processes, but it also directs institutions for sustainable regional development, such as biosphere reserves, to aim to fulfil this criterion (as best they can…). Drawing lessons from community intervention projects and implementing them while taking the political culture of the region into account is worth attempting and may prove quite fruitful. This is important because, to some extent, regional management within BRs is a form of social work.

References

Almond, G.A. & S. Verba 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations.* Boston.

Borsdorf, F. 2009. Biosphere Reserves as Stimuli for participatory Local Governance? Conceptual Frame and Initial Results of a Research Project. In: Hohe Tauern National Park (ed.), *Conference Volume: 4th Symposium of the Hohe Tauern National Park for Research in Protected Areas, Sept. 17–19, 2009, Castle of Kaprun.* Mittersill: 35–37.

Brand, K.-W. & V. Fürst 2002. Voraussetzungen und Probleme einer Politik der Nachhaltigkeit. In: Brand, K.-W. (ed.), *Politik der Nachhaltigkeit. Voraussetzungen, Probleme und Chancen – eine kritische Diskussion.* Berlin: 15–109.

Falk F. Borsdorf

Bröckling, U. 2007. *Das unternehmerische Selbst. Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*. Frankfurt a. M.

Burns, N., K.L. Schlozman & S. Verba 2001. *The Private Roots of Public Action*. Cambridge, MA.

Coleman, J. 1990. *Foundations in Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA.

Dangschat, J.S. 2004. Die Lokale Agenda 21 als Instrument der Verwaltungsmodernisierung. In: Diebäcker, M. (ed.), *Partizipative Stadtentwicklung und Agenda 21: Diskurse – Methoden – Praxis*. Wien: 41–50.

Fürst, D., M. Lahner & K. Pollermann 2006. Entstehung und Funktionsweise von Regional Governance bei dem Gemeinschaftsgut Natur und Landschaft. Analysen zu Place-making und Governance-Prozessen in Biosphärenreservaten in Deutschland und Großbritannien. *Beiträge zur räumlichen Planung* 82. Hannover.

Jungbauer-Gans, M. 2006. Einleitende Betrachtungen zum Begriff Sozialkapital. In: Gehmacher, E. et al. (eds.), *Sozialkapital. Neue Zugänge zu den gesellschaftlichen Kräften*. Wien: 17–43.

Jungmeier, M. et al. 2009. *Part_b: Partizipationsprozesse in Biosphärenparks – Interventionstheorie, Strategieanalyse und Prozessethik am Beispiel vom Biosphärenpark Wienerwald, Großes Walsertal und Nationalpark Nockberge, Bd. 1: Zentrale Ergebnisse*. Klagenfurt.

Köck, G., G. Koch & C. Diry 2009. The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve „Biosphärenpark Wienerwald (Vienna Woods) – a Long History of Conservation. *eco.mont – Journal on Protected Mountain Areas Research* 1 (1): 51–56.

Lahner, M. 2009. *Regional Governance in Biosphärenreservaten. Eine Analyse am Beispiel der Regionen Rhön und Schalsee unter Einbeziehung von Place-Making*. Stuttgart.

Lange, S. 2005. *Leben in Vielfalt. UNESCO-Biosphärenreservate als Modellregionen für ein Miteinander von Mensch und Natur*. Wien.

Lessenich, S. 2008. *Die Neuerfindung des Sozialen. Der Sozialstaat im flexiblen Kapitalismus*. Bielefeld.

Lessenich, S. 2009. Mobilität und Kontrolle. Zur Dialektik der Aktivgesellschaft. In: Dörre, K., S. Lessenich & H. Rosa (eds.), *Soziologie – Kapitalismus – Kritik. Eine Debatte*. Frankfurt a. M.: 126–177.

Mead, G.H. 1972 [1934]. *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviourist*. Chicago.

Meadowcroft, J. 2004. Participation and sustainable development: modes of citizen, communal and organisational involvement. In: Lafferty, W.M. (ed.), *Governance for Sustainable Development. The challenge of Adopting Form to Function*. Cheltenham: 162–190.

Norris, P. 2002. *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge.

Oedl-Wieser, T. 2010. Frauen und Politik: Ermächtigung und Partizipation, *RAUM* 77, 30–32.

Putnam, R.D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York.

Rosa, H. 2009. Leiharbeiter und Aktivbürger: Was stimmt nicht mit dem spätmodernen Kapitalismus? In: Dörre, K., S. Lessenich & H. Rosa (eds.), *Soziologie – Kapitalismus – Kritik. Eine Debatte*. Frankfurt a.M.: 205–242.

Stoll-Kleemann, S. & M. Welp 2008. Participatory and Integrated Management of Biosphere Reserves. *GAIA* 17 (S1): 161–168.

Ulram, P.A. 2000. Civic Democracy. Politische Beteiligung und Politische Unterstützung. In: Pelinka, A. et al. (eds.), *Die Zukunft der österreichischen Demokratie. Trends, Prognosen und Szenarien*. Vienna: 103–140.

Walter, F. & S. Rosenberger 2007. *Skilled Voices? Reflections on Political Participation and Education in Austria*. Education Working Paper, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. Paris.

Zumaglini, M. et al. 2007. Participation processes in regional development: DIAMONT's Perspective. *DIAMONT Reports* WP 10 / 11. Innsbruck. Available at: http://www.uibk.ac.at/diamont/results/reports.htm (accessed: 11/08/2010).

ZOBODAT - www.zobodat.at

Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

Autor(en)/Author(s): Borsdorf Falk F.