

Do we need to consider gender equality for sustainable regional development?

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, challenges for rural areas in Alpine regions have risen as a result of young women obtaining very good qualification levels. They tend to leave regions that do not provide adequate job opportunities or they refuse to return to these regions after having completed higher education. The construction of bipolarity and hierarchy in the gender relationships, which prevents intra-generational gender justice, is very real in the Alpine regions as in all European states. However, many of the specific problems of regional development in the Alps are still not recognized in their gender-specific dimensions.

Keywords: gender equality, quality of life, rural development, rural governance, social-ecological transformation

1 Gender equality as indicator for quality of life

Based on the assumption that regional development is a process to bring about a healthy diversified economy and improved quality of life, sustainable regional development aims at the integration of ecological concerns to create a balance between economy, environment, society and culture. Unlike a scientific approach, sustainability functions as a normative concept which demands ecologically compatible as well as social just development to cope successfully with the current challenges. As a consequence, sustainable development might best be characterized as a “contested discursive field” (Becker et al. 1999) that forces us to negotiate how we want to live and to organize living together under changing global conditions.

Since the 1992 Conference for Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro¹ and the growing interest in sustainable development, the idea of quality of life which is central to economic and social assessment, has gained higher priority as an increasingly discussed policy goal. However, quality of life is difficult to measure. The commonly used indicators of economic success, such as per capita income, do not integrate non-financial issues. Several other systems and scales, like the Human Development Index used by the United Nations Development Programme or the National Welfare State Index supported by Green Parties, consider additional long-term measurements but none has gained widespread acceptance so far.

For the Alpine region Keller (2006) developed 50 indicators to compare quality of life. They measure economic strength, employment, biodiversity and environmental

¹ <http://www.unep.org/Documents/Default.asp?DocumentID=78&ArticleID=1163> (accessed 08/09/2011)

protection, as well as health, leisure and gender equality. He is convinced that gender equality has to be taken into account if we want to avoid half the population feeling disadvantaged and looking elsewhere for more congenial circumstances. In 2002, the federal government in its Austrian Strategy for Sustainable Development also ranked gender equality among the five main tasks (the other four being decent living conditions, future-proof lifestyle, development options for all generations as well as education and research to develop the knowledge society; Bundesregierung Österreich 2002). These concepts are documents of serious efforts to realize political decisions. Parallel to the Cork Conference in 1996², which highlighted the importance of rural areas for the European Union and the need to promote their development in general, gender equity measures were put on the agenda of the EU structural funds as well as community initiatives for the support and development of rural areas like LEADER. With the Agenda 2000 gender mainstreaming was integrated as one of the main principles of the structural funds (EU regulation No.1260/1999; Kommission der Europäischen Gemeinschaften 2000). Therefore it should be considered not only with the social but also with regional objectives.

The first evaluation of the EU structural funds' impact in 2002 found only very limited initial stages of the integration of equal opportunity in regional management. "This neglect of the gender aspects of regional development processes and potentials triggers social costs because regional resources and potentials lie fallow, regional policy interventions lose some of their efficiency, democratic and cultural acceptance is impacted and, last but not least, regional problems are thus (re)produced" (Aufhauser et al. 2003: 7). The mid-term review of the Austrian Programme for the Development of Rural Areas 2007–2013, published in 2011, once again revealed that many of the specific problems of (peripheral) rural areas are still not recognized in their gender specific dimensions. In addition, many seemingly gender-neutral programmes and measures reproduce and stipulate several forms of inequality between men and women (Oedl-Wieser 2011: 3).

The situation is similar in many other European countries as confirmed by the European Study on Employment, Growth and Innovation in Rural Areas (SEGI-RA). In spite of the EU legislative commitment and the fact that "in many initiatives and local LEADER+ action groups women are very active members" (Wiesinger 2008: 33), equal opportunity for men and women is hardly realized in the regional development programmes. Male-dominated decision-making structures and traditional gender roles are rarely thematized (Oedl-Wieser 2011: 21).

An update of the European Commission's database on women and men in decision-making in 2011 included data on political decision-making at regional level (for those regions where there had been elections, e.g. in Styria). "Across the EU as a whole, the gender balance in regional assemblies has hardly changed since 2004." At the most, women account for 31% in any regional assembly and for 32% of regional executives. Only 15% of assemblies are led by women³.

² http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/cork_en.htm (accessed 21/09/2011)

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1031&furtherNews=yes> (accessed 02/06/2011)

Whereas the importance of gender equality for sustainable development is widely recognized at the political level, the question remains how far it is accepted as a guideline for research and regional initiatives in the Alps. As comparative gender studies in the field of regional development in the Alps are (still) lacking, this initial article looks for answers by compiling appropriate available gender studies and referring to current discussions about sustainable development in the Alps. By focusing on women along the aspects of political integration, brain drain and working conditions, I would like to enter the debate about the necessity of integrating gender equality into research about and concepts of sustainable Alpine regional development.

2 Contradictions between the postulated and the practised integration of gender equality aspects

Taking the Alpine Space Programme as the main transnational cooperation to promote regional development in the Alps in a sustainable way, its projects and conferences can be seen as accepted role models with special attention “to the perspectives of equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming and sustainable development” according to their operational programme (Alpine Space 2007–2013: 5). A quick spot check reveals that gender issues are still largely missing. Gender mainstreaming is usually integrated as a work package into the project plans but, unlike the social inclusion of all generations, it is hard to find gender-specific results in the presentations and discussions, e.g. at the forum “Coping with demographic change”⁴. The well-known fact that on average women live longer than men does not result in the conclusion that more older women than men will live in an aging society in future. In general the gender-specific imbalance is shown by the tables but not mentioned in the text. The gender perspective is also missed within the context of amenity migration. Are there no signs that the percentage of women in the higher age groups increases by the surviving women of the amenity migrants who quite often move in as couples (or do the widows move back to their former place of residence)?

2.1 The political integration of women

Research projects with participatory approaches are more likely to take gender perspectives into account. We know from experience that it is quite difficult to find enough women to participate (Moser 2009: 115; Borsdorf 2010: 167). Yet mountain researchers like Hunziker and Buchecker (2008) hope for future mountain development in Alpine regions that it will be possible to include hitherto less involved groups – like the women – better by local civic action and engagement. Rural gender researchers are less optimistic: “Women have come a long way in achieving formal political citizenship rights (...). However, in practices gender inequalities have remained in force with regard to women’s political participation as well as their opportunity to influence policy-making and to get specific issues onto the political

⁴ <http://www.alpine-space.eu/information-center/events/alpine-space-thematic-events/> (accessed 15/09/2011)

agenda” (Asztalos Morell & Bock 2008: 14). Gender-specific discourses on rural development and local resource management also prevent topics seen as important for women’s quality of life from not being taken seriously: “There are female voices in particular demanding more resources for rural development, for public services, and for culture (arts and heritage activities). The activists in cultural groups feel that the significance of culture for a good quality of life is not recognised by the decision-makers, and neither is its long-term significance for the development of tourism and general attractiveness of the area” (Lehto & Oksa 2009: 42).

Shortall criticizes that in general gendered barriers to participation are not addressed at all. As long as women have to adopt the male pattern of behaviour to participate and were seen as ‘women’ rather than equal players in the rural structures of governance, the gendered nature of rural development policy will not change but sustain patriarchal gender relations (Shortall 2006: 219). Pini, who studied women’s participation in rural local government in Australia, identified a range of men’s “resistance strategies that minimize women’s roles as mayors, exclude them from knowledge, information and networks and sexualize them. Thus, despite the increased numerical presence of women, the local government sphere is (re)gendered as legitimately masculine” (Asztalos Morell & Bock 2008: 25). Bock & Derksen (2006), who identified ideological and cultural barriers to women’s participation in rural development in The Netherlands, argue that women’s underrepresentation even questions the legitimacy of ‘new rural governance’ which has received considerable attention in recent years. Within such new structures rural partnerships have become a central component of rural development programmes aimed at rural sustainability. “However, it quickly became obvious that few women were participating within new rural structures of governance” (Shortall 2006: 217). In addition, there is an overwhelming majority of men in higher-ranking decision-making positions, yet more women join and are active in groups.

“Little & Austin (1996) were among the first to unravel the rural gender ideology in which women’s role as caretaker of the home and the community took primacy, thereby inhibiting women’s engagement in employment and politics” (Asztalos Morell & Bock 2008: 7). This seems to be also true for Alpine regions. As the traditional division of labour into male breadwinner and female housekeeper is still widespread in the ARGE-ALP countries (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Alpenländer), it can be expected that women’s primary responsibility for unpaid care, family and household work does not only contribute to their continued economic dependency but also their political abstinence (Appelt et al. 2003). The most recent regional elections in Tyrol confirm this thesis: the percentage of female representatives decreased from 33% to 25%, the number of female mayors increased from two to eight women out of 279 municipalities (Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung 2010).

2.2 Brain drain and working conditions

Changes as well as challenges for rural areas in Alpine regions can be expected by the increasing number of young women obtaining very good qualification levels at the beginning of the 21st century. Female students as well as graduates of the Tyrolean

universities and other higher-education institutions for instance now outnumber men (Amt der Tiroler Landesregierung 2010). The same is true for South Tyrol – Alto Adige (Tappeiner et al. 2010: 101). Even for “the Catholic rural working-class girl” (dem katholischen Arbeitermädchen vom Lande“ (Peisert 1967)) it has become a matter of course to be well qualified. A fair number of women tend to leave regions that do not provide adequate job opportunities or refuse to return to these regions after having completed higher education. They might anticipate the problems of achieving a satisfactory work-life-balance in remote areas with long commuting distances. And to date the responsibility for care and housework remains primarily with the women. Not many rural societies have realized their need for educated and competent people in their development process and have taken action.

In addition to limited career opportunities, focus groups’ participants of a study on prospects for university graduates in South Tyrol – Alto Adige put forward soft criteria like the higher degree of freedom from social control, open mindedness vs. a rather closed mentality in their native region or the limited possibilities for living as a pluralistic, multi-lingual person for staying away (Bua et al. 2008: 166). In part they change their mind as soon as they start a family: “Female participants in particular repeatedly stated the wish for moving to a place with a better living quality the moment they started a family. In this context South Tyrol-Alto Adige was considered to be a better option than a city like Milan” (Bua et al. 2008: 167). But not every place offers the same options. We can see that “(...) young families are moving to more attractive Alpine locations and as yet no strategies seem to have been developed to stop that trend“ (Braun & Borsdorf 2008: 105).

Further to an uneven geographical distribution, there is a growing “surplus of men” in the important age groups for forming partnerships and starting a family in some of the regions. Austrian experts participating in a DELPHI study within the INTERREG-III-B-Project DIAMONT were much more sceptical about the cultural and socio-economic than about the ecological sustainability of the Alpine regions (Bender 2006). A similar tendency has been registered in Italy. The Trentino is the Italian province with the greatest male/female imbalance. Environmental economist Gretter (2007) concludes that without women it will be almost impossible to prevent the depopulation of mountain villages. Besides being indispensable for procreation, women seem to be more interested than men in training that is useful for sustainable development. Financial support alone does not seem to improve the demographic patterns of Alpine regions as the comparison of South Tyrol and the Aosta Valley reveals. “The Aosta Valley has received an even greater amount of subsidies, but this has not reversed the downward-spiralling trend” (Zucca 2006: 30).

As a possible consequence, and also with regard to the more limited range of social services such as childcare, medical care and public transport in rural areas, it is less astonishing that these no longer present higher fertility rates than urban areas. “Only Alpine France almost reaches the replacement value (...) which is often thought to result from good support for reconciling employment with family responsibilities” (Köhler 2008: 133). There are however hopeful indications that the contradictions and conflicts which exist between the postulated equality of men and women in the workplace and the way families actually organize themselves are de-

creasing in the ARGE-ALP countries (Appelt et al. 2003). There are first signs of improvement also at the political level: On 1 September 2010, the Tyrolean Child Education and Childcare Act came into force. It promises over 32 million additional Euros to be allocated to childcare in the federal province of Tyrol, Austria. The changing values of the people are slowly becoming accepted in Alpine regions also, including gender equality and better compatibility of family responsibilities and a career.

As our society is organized around paid employment, this is the main source of revenue for the majority of people. Therefore the employment rate, the proportion of employed residents of working age (15 to 64 years), is a very relevant indicator for sustainable development. In Alpine regions female employment rates have increased but we have to bear in mind that “major increases occurred in regions where female employment rates were low in 1990” (Briquel 2008: 159). In addition, the volume of female employment has not increased as much as the female employment rate due to a high percentage of part-time work and precarious employment. For women the economy is far less diversified in the Alpine regions, similar to the Scottish Highlands and Islands region where the “labour market shows strong differentiation along gender lines with more men involved in the traditional sectors based on natural resources (agriculture, fishing, forestry, etc), finance and manufacturing. Women dominate jobs in the tourism, public administration, education and health sectors, but men hold most of the leadership and management jobs with these sectors” (Árnason et al. 2009: 14).

3 Perspectives for an equal opportunity integrating sustainable development

We have to conclude that gender equality efforts are always at risk. “It is in recognizing and articulating the interaction effects that exist between different conditions in rural areas and geographical location that a deeper understanding of space and place considerations in women’s lives will be forthcoming. To make real progress in this sphere, comparative investigations of similar issues and processes in a variety of localities are needed, in order to tease out the potency of geographical effects” (Hoggart 2004: 10). This is especially true for Alpine regions and localities where gender specific comparative studies are lacking. The introduction of new policies also demands a particular framework for research. To develop a strategy for sustainable regional development and to manage Alpine future with urbanization on the one hand and depopulation on the other, gender knowledge and analysis from the perspective of these areas is needed, also gender-disaggregated data and gendered analyses of plans, decision-making bodies and gender distribution in general. Gender as an analytical category will help to identify man-made barriers which prevent sustainable regional development.

As long as assumptions are made about ‘the community’ that do not consider internal social differentiation, unequal power relations within the group and differential participation in development processes continue to be ignored. Equal oppor-

tunity must be accorded high priority not only on the (supra)national but also on the local and regional political agendas to improve and to guarantee women's quality of life but also that of other disadvantaged groups. As the mid-term review of the Austrian Programme for the Development of Rural Areas 2007–2013 revealed, this measure, intended to improve the quality of life for everybody, reproduced the traditional structures rather than proactively changing the relationships and living conditions that discriminate women (Oedl-Wieser 2011). To avoid this and to sensitize everybody for the gender-specific dimensions of Alpine (peripheral) rural areas, gender impact assessment of local and regional policy is needed and the strategies of regional development programmes have to be changed towards equal opportunities for women and men and a better quality of life for them all. As the Northern Feminist University in peripheral Norway shows, institutions like that can contribute to increasing the region's consciousness of equal opportunities and policies for rural women (Limstrand & Stemland 2004).

In addition to changes in the policy framework at local and regional level, more fundamental changes of social norms and contracts are needed for achieving sustainable development. Brüggemann et al. (2003) who regret the lack of convincing role models and visions of development for a sustainable future demand that the traditional socio-economy be superseded by socio-ecology of work for rural areas. This concept integrates employment as a key factor with the use as well as the protection of natural resources. According to these authors a re-evaluation of work could be achieved by appreciating environmental and social interdependencies, by equal opportunities for all types of rural areas as well as for all members of rural society regardless of age, gender, sex, physical abilities, religion, etc.

Following this concept in many aspects, Winterfeld et al. (2007: 98) moreover emphasize the necessity of appreciating women as caretakers of the home and the community as political actors and their work as public added value. In addition to natural productivity, all kinds of private and social care should be integrated into this new re/productional concept of work. This becomes even more necessary with an aging society and an increasing amount of care activities. Currently such activities are marginalized and hidden from view. The authors express their demands for a sustainable future as follows: "Socio-ecological transformation processes need political and economical concepts that are **not** based on marginalizing certain working realities [like care and housework mainly reserved for women] and natural processes" (Winterfeld et al. 2007: 111).

The coming Rio+20 conference and the growing debates about 'Green Economy' and 'Green New Deal' offer an opportunity for raising these topics again and increasing awareness of the necessity for a balance of employment, care and natural productivity in a re-arranged economy. This could become an important step towards gender democracy in general and towards increasing gender sensitivity in Alpine regional development. Such a political culture would allow women to develop a positive personal identity anchored to a sense of place and support them in taking on responsibility for the sustainable development of the qualities that the living landscape in Alpine mountain regions has to offer.

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