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Social capital as a key source for sustainable development in protected mountain areas: experiences from Großes Walsertal biosphere reserve

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Abstract

Sustainable development in protected areas demands the continuous involvement of local stakeholders and citizens. However, while this principle exists on paper and has constituted a central paradigm of sustainable development since the Rio Conference, its implementation and enforcement often appear to present a number of significant challenges. Therefore, the existence of deeper forms of voluntary involvement can be considered a decisive factor in successful sustainable development contexts and strategies. Strong ties between individuals, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, and the willingness to make a contribution to developments projects with uncertain individual benefits, are valuable resources; awareness of and emphasis on social capital can have a major impact on the regional networks of a protected mountain area. The Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve (BR) seems to have done a good job considering the significance of deeper forms of involvement right from the start. As is argued by this paper, the experiences there clearly reflect a conscious decision to recognise and utilise strong ties and other aspects of social capital in the region.

Keywords: social capital, sustainable development, protected mountain areas.

1 Introduction

Under the influence of globalization and free markets, personal ties and relations between individuals have changed significantly in all European countries. New opportunities at home and in the labor market were accompanied by a trend towards increased individualism and the loss of social contacts and links (Etzioni 1996). Western societies are characterized by a loss of public spirit and the willingness to vouch for fellow-citizens (Putnam 2000). In addition, a loss of trust in politics and state-institutions led to a decrease in voter-turnout rates and party memberships in the realm of conventional political participation (Norris 2002). Taken together, all these trends both reflect and influence the lifestyles of individuals within Western societies (Dangschat & Frey 2005). An acceleration in the pace of everyday-life contributes its bit to a vicious cycle that threatens social relationships and ways of life significantly. Last but not least, social welfare systems changed in many of these societies: the "active" or "entrepreneurial self" who *leads* his/her own life instead of "merely living" began to be seen as the norm, and as a prerequisite to acquiring the benefits of social welfare (Bröckling 2007). These tendencies were also echoed in spatial dynamics with segregation, an increase of single-person households and gentrification as their concomitants (Borsdorf & Bender 2010). Regional development

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processes in protected areas must confront these challenges to ensure sustainability. As put forward in this paper, the Großes Walsertal region seems to have been aware of the importance of a sense of community within the population of the valley, and thus played a highly involved role from the beginning of the Biosphere Reserve implementation process.

In the course of this paper, however, it is argued that social capital has the potentials to facilitate regional development processes within protected areas significantly. After a study into the theoretical underpinnings and cross-cuts between central concepts, the case-study of the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve will be introduced, comprising the analysis of already existing data from province-wide as well as regionally conducted research. A final conclusion will provide the reader with an outlook on a research project currently conducted on the concrete situation of social capital in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve.

Methodologically, however, this paper portrays the results of a content analysis of results from a province-wide social capital analysis (Fredersdorf et al. 2010), a study conducted two years ago on regional development in the Großes Walsertal region (Coy & Weixlbaumer 2007; Rumpolt 2009), and a study on the "Lebenswelt Großes Walsertal" (Fritsche & Studer 2009). This content analysis viewed key elements of social capital theory as phenomena, thereby looking at the extent to which they are present in the region from the stance of a phenomenological approach (Hammond et al. 1991).

2 Social capital, community and sustainable development

Looking at the societal dimension of sustainability which is reflected in the social element of the concept, a basic thrust of sustainable politics and of regional-level development is to make future-oriented decisions cooperatively with those who will feel their consequences, i. e. the local citizens (Meadowcroft 2004). First of all, this demand to open up decision-making processes to public participation in policy fields that concern sustainability constitutes the 1993 Brundtland Reports' suggestion on how to implement sustainable decisions and practices. Secondly, it is an important element of UNESCO's Seville Strategy for Biosphere Reserves (Lange 2005; Stoll-Kleemann & Welp 2008) as well as of the criteria set up for environmental governance in protected areas by the IUCN's Durban accord (Mose & Weixlbaumer 2006). Therefore, Biosphere Reserves, as protected areas and models for the sustainable coexistence of Man and Biosphere, need to acknowledge and implement governance models that enable local stakeholders to participate in development processes on the regional level.

Both movements devoted entirely to restoring certain patterns of social relations, environmental and communitarian movements have progressed along parallel lines in recent years. Each movement recognized a crisis situation: The communitarians were worried about a loosening of social ties in the course of the modernization process and a trend towards increased individualism within society. At the same time, environmental discourse raised worries about the relationship between human beings and their environments in the wake of elements of environmental cri-

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sis such as climate change, a loss of biodiversity or the contamination of rivers and lakes (Etzioni 2000). Thus, the bottom line of both movements was that a sense of common responsibility for social and environmental relations needs to reenter the minds of all individuals.

A first international attempt to take this sense of community seriously was made by the so-called Brundtland report from the World Commission on Environment and Development, which was published in 1987 and titled "Our Common Future". Deeply rooted in the belief that the law alone cannot enforce common interest, this document held that: "It principally requires community knowledge and support, which entails greater public participation in the decisions that affect the environment." (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 63). Much in the spirit of this "new ethic" (Warburton 2000), the Agenda 21 document negotiated and issued in the course of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development made several references to the revived significance of community for sustainable development processes: the "role of local communities" (article 3.2), the "empowerment of local and community groups" (3.5), or the "capacity building on the local level and the support of a community-driven approach to sustainability" (3.12). Most prominently, the document outlined that: "Governments, in cooperation with appropriate international and non-governmental organizations, should support a community-based approach to sustainability." (Agenda 21: 3.7). In the meantime, these basic ideas have managed to influence many official documents and development strategies at all levels of governance (from international over national and regional to local ones).

In the light of these developments, however, several authors have called for the creation of sustainable communities made up by physical, social, political and human environments. Additionally, "(j)ustice, equity, voluntarism, and philanthropy contribute to the sustainability of communities" (Bray 1996: 3). The basic assumption on which these ideas comprise was outlined by Etzioni's "The Spirit of Community", which basically held that "for societies to sustain a commitment to the common good – whether it is social, moral, environmental, or the very sustainability of a community – this concern needs to be undergirded with a set of social institutions." (Etzioni 2000: 43). In its most basic sense, however, this meant that the perceived modernization-driven loss of community with its transition from "Gemeinschaft"-like social relations to contractual and business-based "Gesellschaft"-like relations needed to be changed if the creation of sustainable communities was the aim (see Marsden & Hines 2008: 24). In other words, Margaret Thatcher's claim that there would be "no such thing as society" led many sociologists to contend that in terms of "(…) nation state society (…) contemporary mobilities call into question and suggest that maybe Thatcher was oddly right." (Urry 2001: 6). According to Marsden & Hines (2008: 26), theories of network society which focused entirely on the juxtaposition of postmodern social scientific theory and a neoliberal political challenge advocating individualism and self-expression through mobile markets, also reestablished a more ecologically embracing concept of community.

As many environmental social scientists recently started to rediscover the concept of sustainable development, a call for strengthening functional and progressive

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communities, networks and personal linkages acquired significant attention within academia. "It is now widely acknowledged that the presence of dense networks within a society, and the accompanying norms of generalized trust and reciprocity, allow citizens to overcome collective action problems more effectively. Social capital is seen as an important resource available to societies and communities." (Hooghe & Stolle 2003: 1). Put differently, as environmental social science called for the creation of sustainable communities, the communitarian idea of social capital as a source of communal orientation and dense networks between individuals entered scientific discourse (Marsden & Hines 2008). Thus, looking at the contribution social capital offers to sustainable regional development processes within Biosphere Reserves can lead to a deeper understanding of the social component of sustainability, too.

In public discourse, however, social capital is often inadvertently used synonymously with civic engagement. Civic engagement itself is often an important prerequisite for the emergence of social capital. However, civic engagement can only work where a relatively high degree of social capital is already present (Rossteutscher 2008). To this extent, the social capital concept is grounded on the key communitarian assumption that individuals need a social community to develop a solid identity. Additionally, it assumes that bridging community relations are also essential for the organization of society and its modes of production, interpersonal exchange and regulation (Gertenbach et al. 2010). "Social capital is defined by its function. (…) Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (Coleman 1990: 98). Society must be rooted in a commonly accepted moral base within that community.

An approach that proposed a community-oriented society was brought into scientific discourse by Robert D. Putnam. In his "Making Democracy Work"-study, Putnam tried to show that differences in participation orientations between Italy's north and south are relevant to the political culture in the regions concerned. He defined social capital as follows: "Social capital refers to the connections among individuals – social networks and the norm of reciprocity and trust-worthiness arise from them" (Putnam 2000: 19). It focuses on "(…) the features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action" (Putnam 2000: 19). That is to say that, "Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production" (Coleman 1990: 98). Therefore, social capital is a participative resource that emerges from assembling persons into networks and leads to more trust and well-being within a community.

According to Putnam (2000) social capital makes us "(…) smarter, healthier, safer, richer and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (Putnam 2000: 290). With social networks, trust and community-centred norms and values inevitably fosters social capital and social relations within society. Members of social networks such as associations, single-issue groups, as well as contacts at work, friends or relatives have the potential to construct a sense of community within society. In democratic societies, solidarity, tolerance and reciprocity in social relations constitute the norms and values of the social capital concept, which further supports this assertion

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(Jungbauer-Gans 2006). Taken together, social capital constitutes a publicly accessible resource that encompasses social networks, trustworthiness, norms and values.

In its application, however, social capital ensures that those who have acquired community oriented attitudes are more willing to contribute to social processes in the belief that others will reward their efforts instead of exploiting them. If this trust is not misplaced, a cooperative approach can lead to a decrease in transaction costs because less financial resources (such as contracts, attorneys, etc.) are needed to safeguard transactions (Jungbauer-Gans 2006: 27). Thus, "trust is the core link between social capital and collective action. Trust is enhanced when individuals are trustworthy, are networked with one another and are within institutions that reward honest behavior. (…) Dense horizontal networks – referred to as bonding social capital – with the capability of efficiently transmitting information across the network members also create incentives to behave in a trustworthy manner even for those who have only selfish motivations" (Ostrom & Ahn 2009: 22). Therefore, social capital is a resource able to contribute to successful and sustainable regional development processes.

A region that embarks upon stimulating activation of and involvement in social capital faces an increased likelihood of being supported by a broad base within the population. Innovations that result from these processes can rapidly lead to a deepening of trustworthiness, and social networks and citizens quickly get the impression that they can actually influence future-oriented processes and the improvement of their living spaces with their ideas. Hence the activation of social capital constitutes a key task for regional managers of protected areas (Borsdorf 2010). It's 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). If taken into account, the awareness of community-orientations can significantly facilitate the actions taken and decisions made by regional managers, as well as local authorities.

At the same time, one should not necessarily champion communities and social capital across the board. Communities can be quite exclusionary and vicious to both insiders and outsiders, as the examples of women in fundamentalist groups, or neo-Nazi groups demonstrate (Hardin 2006; Etzioni 2000). The same is true for social capital when "The flow of benefits generated by capital may all be positive or a smaller group may be benefited while a larger group is harmed" (Ostrom & Ahn 2009: 20). Therefore, it is crucial to not only involve local groups and individuals in sustainable development projects, but also supervise these processes to ensure that community-orientations and social capital in the region do not take on these particularly negative characteristics. Furthermore, the involvement of those who usually follow selfish incentives takes constant motivation from the outside and the transmission of a climate of trust within the communities concerned. "Trust is enhanced when individuals are trustworthy, are networked with one another and are within institutions that reward honest behaviour" (Ostrom & Ahn 2009: 22). Regional managements of Biosphere Reserves have to continuously keep this in mind to really profit from social capital within the communities concerned.

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As illustrated in Figure 1, social capital is to be viewed as one of many forms of capital. All of these forms perform different functions: "Human capital, such as education and training, is itself useful directly in the production of goods. Social and personal capital come in later at the point of converting the consumption of goods into welfare. Financial capital is embodied in money and other financial instruments, physical capital typically in machinery or fixed property, and human capital in educated abilities, talents, and knowledge" (Hardin 2006: 86). According to O'Riordan (2004), these five models of capital constitute crucial elements in the implementation of sustainable development (see Figure 1): human capital, natural capital, financial capital, manufactured capital and social capital. Build up through various indicative strategies, these forms of capital are thought to significantly contribute to the sustainable economic performance of a regional entity. Therefore, research into stakeholder dialogues, support for local economy, forms of community investment or supply chain initiatives in general fall into the category of social capital.

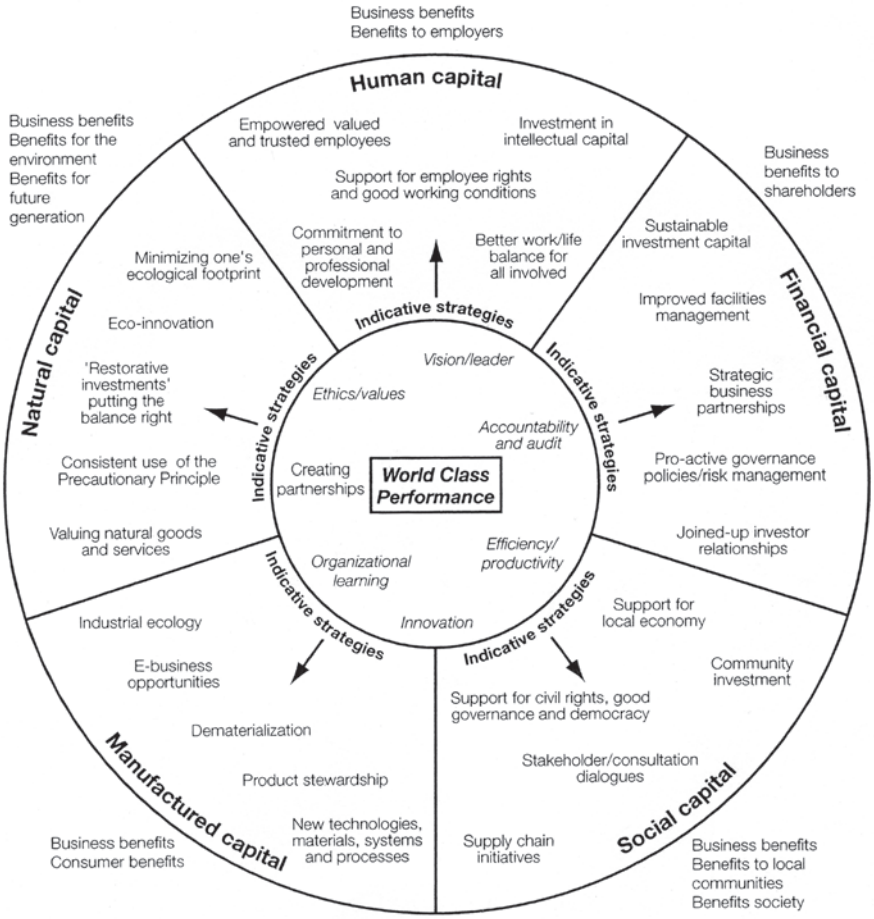

Figure 1: The Five Capitals Model and Sustainable Development according to O'Riordan (2004: 137) .

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Last but not least, special attention in both social capital research and practice must center on gender differences in community orientations. Thus far, the main focus of social capital research has rested upon male-dominated activities, while the informal sociability that characterizes women-dominated engagement was largely discounted. The only reference Putnam (2000) made to gender differences in community-orientations was that "(…) informal social connectedness is more common among women ("schmoozers"), while formal involvement is more frequent among men ("machers")" (Stenbacka & Tillberg Matson 2009: 79). However, current research seems to be well aware of the fact that "(…) there are large gender differences concerning both the roles within the associations and the type of associations engaged in" (Stenbacka & Tillberg Matson 2009: 79). For instance, men hold more positions related to leadership and educational tasks in voluntary associations, while women more frequently work in the fields of information, opinion sharing, gathering and direct help. At the same time, men are more directly involved in sports clubs while women focus their engagement on fields like health, education and social services. On top of that, male engagement appears to more frequently cross the lines between networks (is more "cross-sectional") while women engage more narrowly within the field of their interest. Additionally, women's engagement is often under strain due to the dual burden of combining career and family in their everyday life. It is far from seldom that this leads to an abandonment of voluntary and community-oriented activities (Stenbacka & Tillberg Mattson 2009). Therefore, in terms of the issues discussed as well as regarding the strategies developed, gender differences in social capital significantly influence the way in which regional development processes are pursued.

Based on these assumptions, however, Sally Lerner (2007) developed a virtuous circle of governance for sustainability in protected areas (see Figure 2) which "(…) links civic engagement, social capital, and community capacity to governance for sustainable development. Each of these elements is seen to both support the conditions for effective collaboration and network participation" (Pollock & Lerner

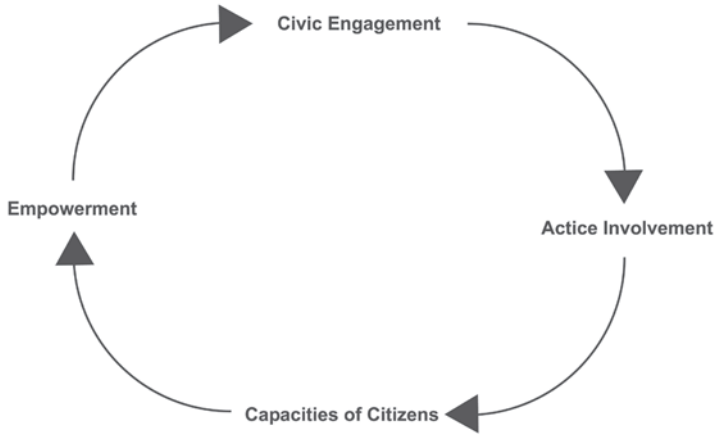

Figure 2: The virtuous Circle of Governance for Sustainability according to Lerner (2007) (own illustration).

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2008: 7). Once taken seriously, civic engagement is soon accompanied by active involvement within the frame of participation processes, thereby strengthening the capacities of the citizens, which in the end results in their empowerment. This empowerment will generate new civic engagement and thus sparks the virtuous process of strengthening citizens' capacities to influence sustainable development processes in their surroundings (Lerner 2007; Pollock & Lerner 2008). As Szerszynski (1997) lines out, self-generating initiatives are closer to the lives and sustainability concerns of locals: "(…) their agendas and activities are more likely to be owned by their participants, as opposed to being felt to have been determined and imposed from outside" (Szerszynski 1997: 151). Applied in participative governance for sustainable development processes, the virtuous circle logic holds that drawing on the knowledge of engaged citizens can foster active involvement and thereby increase the capacities of those involved. As a consequence, however, the empowerment that results from these dynamics constructs even more engaged citizens to consult in the course of participative landscape governance. Taken together, this also means that virtuous circles for sustainable regional development can only work if regional managements abstain from using paternalistic approaches in their participatory processes and instruments.

3 Social capital as a facilitating factor for sustainable development in protected areas: the case of the Großes Walsertal biosphere reserve

An interesting example of a region that already exhibits intensified community orientations and social capital is the Großes Walsertal. Located in the Austrian province Vorarlberg, the region successfully established itself as a Biosphere Reserve in 2000. Initially, the idea of establishing a protected area in the region was born of a crisis situation in the valley. The valley's remote location with all the problems typical of rural regions (Fritsche & Studer 2009) – weak infrastructure and public transport, few jobs, large numbers of commuters, an ageing population, and so on – led the six villages to contemplate how to confront this situation. The goal of this process was to come up with an idea of how to establish the Großes Walsertal as a model region for sustainable development. It did not take long until a model suitable to fit this purpose was identified, and joining the UNESCOs worldwide network of Biosphere Reserves appeared to be an appropriate course of action (Reutz-Hornsteiner 2009: 18). Public support for this idea was quickly generated, not only through a bundling of the preexisting "Livable living"-initiatives and networks, but also by opening up the planning phase to broad citizen participation. Additionally, the newly established supra-municipal REGIO-organisation provided a legal framework upon which a protected area could rest. As often the case in regionalization processes (Köstlin 1980), a charismatic person promoted the establishment of the Biosphere Reserve, namely the farmer, chairman of the REGIO and member of Vorarlberg's provincial parliament Josef Türtscher (Jungmeier et al. 2010: 64). With the official acceptance of UNESCO, Großes Walsertal became a Biosphere Reserve in 2000.

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Even more striking than the impressive speed of its implementation is the public spirit and deep sense of community that facilitated this process. An overwhelming feeling of togetherness among important stakeholders in the region became evident in almost all regional development projects conducted in the region (Jungmeier et al. 2010), which has persisted to the time of writing. Therefore, it appears quite fruitful to take a closer look at community-orientations and social capital in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve as a model region for sustainable development.

Overall, social capital in Großes Walsertal appears to have fallen on very favorable ground in a province that has been quite active in measuring and facilitating it throughout recent years. An Office for Future Issues of the provincial government is entirely devoted to themes such as civic engagement, social capital and sustainable local and regional development, and has run continuous province-wide studies to measure social capital in Vorarlberg. Additionally, it has initiated a number of projects with diverse target groups including entrepreneurs, public management institutions and local inhabitants of some municipalities. Within its province-wide Network on Civic Engagement, though, the Office also attempted to strengthen coordination, communication and networking among politics, public management, municipalities, private enterprises, associations, and schools (Hellrigl 2006: 93). In short, the region was able to gain crucial support and the advice of a provincial institution already working in the field of community orientations (a fact that was of enormous help throughout the implementation phase of the Biosphere Reserve).

In its third and most recent study on social capital and civic engagement, the office not only wanted to measure the current situation in the province regarding community-orientations, but also attempted to install a basis for constant representative monitoring on these topics. Using a representative sample, the study figured out that social capital and civic engagement are strongly present in Vorarlberg's society: Four of six dimensions of civic engagement (sense of community, engagement in local associations, and materialist as well as postmaterialist orientations and values) and eight of nine dimensions of social capital (strong ties, weak ties, trust on the personal level, trust towards state institutuions, an absence of fear and negative social capital, sanity, and a good quality of life) scored high values in the entire sample. Interestingly, not even societal cleavages such as education or job status play a major role in community orientations in the population of Vorarlberg (Fredersdorf et al. 2010: 4). Thus, judging from the data gathered in the province-wide studies, we could easily assume that a lively stock of social capital is present in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve as well.

Taking a closer look at dense networks (bonding social capital) in the region, it appears evident that these exist in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve: solutions to common problems in the region have always been found collaboratively, such as a cheese-shop for the entire valley in Thüringerberg, a grocery-store for all municipalities in Sonntag, or a ride-sharing platform for all inhabitants of the region (Fritsche & Studer 2009: 15). Additionally, the commonly developed and quickly implemented Biosphere Reserve framework would not have been possible without the regional collaboration of many local associations (Reutz-Hornsteiner 2009). Furthermore, the large and active stock of 111 associations in the region is simply

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quite impressive (Fritsche & Studer 2009: 83). As the common establishment of the REGIO as a regional development platform by the six municipalities demonstrates, dense networking not only concerns private but also public forms of cooperation and collaboration. It is within the committees (in the fields of farming, education, schools & culture, tourism, commerce, environment, social services, and youth) of this supra-municipal body where most of the networking between local citizens, representatives from municipalities and the local economies takes place. On top of that, municipalities managed to establish a common building authority for all villages in the valley in Raggal (Fritsche & Studer 2009: 33), an effort which saves them a great deal of money.

Due to a largely congruent social structure in the Großes Walsertal, networks across societal cleavages (bridging social capital) are not as vital for the region as they would be for cities like Bregenz or Dornbirn. Secondly, the minor role that differences in education and job status play in social capital in Vorarlberg (Fredersdorf et al. 2010) partly diminishes the need for bridging social capital, which is usually a matter of great urgency in other places, such as deprived areas of metropolises. Nevertheless, the high diversity of associational foci and the forms of cooperation and collaboration between them indicates that the capacities for problem-solving in this realm clearly exist.

As is evident from previous studies in the region, a high level of acceptance of the Biosphere Reserve (84.2% approval within a group of 532 people interviewed in the course of a household survey) as well as a high degree of readiness to participate in regional participation and development processes (25.2% of the same group have already participated in a workshop of the Biosphere Reserve, while a total of 40% would be ready to take part in one) indicate that trust (an important prerequisite of participation) is clearly present in the region (Rumpolt 2009: 52). These facts become even more striking when compared with the Austrian average: According to Plasser & Ulram (2010: 167–168) only 30% of Austrians are active participants and would take part in unconventional forms of participation. Thus, embarking upon a bottom-up involvement and thereby giving locals the impression of having a say right from the start (Weixlbaumer & Coy 2009) may have contributed to increased trust (interpersonal as well as between citizens and local authorities) in the region. The common search for an overall concept for regional development – which more than 70 people participated in (Reutz-Hornsteiner 2009: 21) – appears to back such assumptions. In addition, it was possible to involve important opinion-leaders of the region right from the start and thereby increase trust among the inhabitants of the Biosphere Reserve. Last but not least, an overly congruent self-perception and outsider's perception prevails in the Großes Walsertal (Coy & Weixlbaumer 2009; Weixlbaumer & Coy 2009) and serves as another indicator for decent trust in the region.

Attesting the experiences made relating to gender differences in community orientations, the province-wide social capital studies conducted in Vorarlberg discovered that men are more frequently involved in organized forms of voluntary associations and are more often those leading the associations (Fredersdorf et al. 2010). Nation-wide studies on civic engagement in Austria underline that the same is true for gender differences in community orientations on the national level (More-Hol-

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lerweger & Heimgartner 2009). Much in the tradition of these more general experiences, the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve reinforced that men are more deeply involved in organized forms of regional networks and social capital than women. To correct this imbalance, the regional management of the Biosphere Reserve has started some initiatives which specifically focus on empowering women, such as the "Alchemilla herbs"-project (Moser 2009). However, though the representation in the committees of the REGIO is still quite traditional (with women being more concerned with social issues than men), the overrepresentation of women in the regional management of the Biosphere Reserve is also evident. Even this situation is quite similar to that present in many regional initiatives, projects and entities throughout the country (Oedl-Wieser 2010; Oedl-Wieser 2006). To sum up, despite male dominance in official associations and most regional committees, the regional management has been aware of informal networking and gender issues as a whole.

4 Conclusion

As experience in many biosphere reserves has shown, the desired results of broad integration of local citizens into participative regional development processes were far from long-lasting in regions that lacked the initiative of engaged citizens and an active stock of social capital. Indeed, we can state that a true culture of sustainability in protected areas is impossible without central elements of social capital. In this understanding, the ideal of a sustainable social capital concerns first and foremost the organization of self-organization. In fact, collective action without institutional coercion to cooperate requires alternative linkages between individuals concerned – linkages that social capital can enhance. Some Biosphere Reserve managers (like those of the Großes Walsertal) have shown awareness of the contribution community-orientations provide for sustainable regional development processes. A current research project in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve will try to acquire more in-depth knowledge on the true status of social capital in the region before proposing an appropriate virtuous circle scenario. To sum up, social capital is doubtlessly of crucial relevance for the success of regional development processes in protected areas.

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