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# Civic engagement and local public governance in Austria – Traditions, current challenges and possible future paths

*civic engagement; cross-sectoral collaboration; local public governance; public service networks; voluntary work*

*Transitions in voluntary work, rising public debts and modified ways how citizens speak out politically challenge more and more the traditional structures of mobilising and making use of civic engagement. They require new models and procedures that complement the traditional ones. This paper focusses on the specific Austrian context and aims to put four possible future paths up on discussion: to integrate citizens increasingly in the process of co-decision, co-design and co-evaluation, to make more use of the so-called “donations of time”, to strengthen innovative forms in the backing of citizen involvement and to link increasingly voluntary work and donations.*

## I. Introduction

The modern society can only be perceived as a *network society* (Herzberg 2013, p. 188) in which different institutions interact with each other to provide public services. This special form of collaboration connects players of the market, public (government), family and non-profit sector (Mendel 2011) that pursues different logics of action (Röber 2012, pp. 19-22, Fürst 2010, pp. 50-51).

Local (public) governance addresses the concept of cross-sectoral collaboration on the level of local communities (Holtkamp/Bogumil 2007). It is often based on *civil society* (Dearing/Bauer 2013, p. 169) and civic engagement. Its forms of appearance, intensity and ways of mobilisation do not only change over time, they also possess *country-specific particularities*. In this context, the present paper puts its focus on the specific situation in *Austria* and aims to give a brief insight into the current state of local civic engagement in this country.

In view of what has been said above, section II. presents some general remarks on civic engagement in the context of local communities. Section III. outlines the traditional structures that have been existing for civic engagement in the recent decades. They are still present in many Austrian communities. Additionally, it aims to point out three current challenges that put these traditional structures increasingly into question. Finally, it reveals some consequences and presents some ideas on which paths citizen engagement might develop in the future. Section IV. discusses some implications of the proposed ideas, identifies some fields for further research and finalises the paper with some conclusions.

## II. Civic engagement and local public governance

As noted above local public governance refers to the *cross-sectoral collaboration* of special groups and institutions on the level of a local community. To realise objectives in the common interest the corresponding services are not (only) separately produced by public or private institutions but within a local network connecting the municipal administration, public corporations, local associations and other non-profit organisations, (local private) enterprises as well as informal groups of citizens (Löffler 2009). Special modes of governance and interventions on the part of government are required and the three following questions are to be answered (Reichard 2002, p. 31):

- Which services are considered to be in the public (common) interest?
- Which is the optimal way to provide such a service?
- Who provides the resources and in which proportion do they originate from the local state, directly from the citizens themselves or from a third party like private corporations or foundations?

In this context municipalities are not only regarded as public authorities but equally as *communities* or social spheres (Wollmann 2002). Civic engagement can blossom in various forms. Citizens directly take part in the provision of services and provide the resources time, know-how and money for the common welfare (Zimmer 2007, p. 96). Local public authorities for their part should generate favourable conditions for civic engagement and – if necessary – support the co-operation partners by assuring coordination, financial contributions (subsidies) and furnishing infrastructure and other types of equipment (Reichard 2002, pp. 35-36).

Civic engagement is oftentimes self-organised or facilitated by local civil society organisations, e.g. local associations or clubs (Zimmer 2007, p. 98) and it occurs mainly in two forms, voluntary work and philanthropic activities.

In the course of *voluntary work* citizens use their time, talents, competences and skills for common affairs. They participate in the decisions regarding the allocation of resources (*co-decision*). They take part in the creation of concrete solutions for special issues (*co-design*), they are directly engaged in the provision of services (*co-production*) and as *co-evaluators* they take a share in the evaluation of outputs and outcomes (Timm-Arnold/Löffler 2013, p. 198).

In the case of *informal* voluntary work citizens contact each other directly. The various forms of neighbourly help are well-known examples. On the contrary *formal* voluntary work takes place within the legal framework of special organisations like local associations (e.g. sports clubs or cultural associations) or other types of non-profit organisations like private welfare services (More-Hollerweger/Rameder 2013, p. 383). It can also be directly mobilised by institutions owned by the state itself like museums (Zimmer 1996) and theaters.

In the course of *philanthropic activities* citizens provide financial resources in the form of donations and similar contributions to facilitate and co-finance the production of services in the common interest.

### III. Civic engagement in Austrian communities in transition

#### 1. The traditional structures of citizen engagement

Regarding the traditional structures of civic engagement on the local level local clubs, societies and associations are of essential importance in Austria. Mainly in small and medium-sized townships they constitute the *core element* of the local community (Meyer/Rameder 2011, p. 11). Thus the traditional form of citizen engagement creates a platform for social exchange which is *not reciprocal*. It assumes that the majority of the people participate in the production of services in local associations. Citizen A is engaged as a volunteer in the local music society, citizen B in the sports club and citizen C in the voluntary fire brigade. By their voluntary work they enable the production of all of the services that can afterwards be used by all of them. Implicitly this view assumes that the *rate of free riders* – meaning citizens that only use the services without participating in their provision – is *negligible*.

In addition to the local associations some larger and nationwide well-known non-profit organisations like the Red Cross or the Caritas operate in the local community by their “local legs“ (Geißel 2007). These units are often organised similar to local clubs and societies. But at the same time they are linked up to a professionalised organisation and have the opportunity to combine voluntary and paid work according to the special conditions of a given township. For example, the Austrian rescue service is predominantly organised in this way.

Normally local public government *subsidises* the local associations as well as the aforementioned non-profit organisations. These grants finance partly their ongoing operations, but more often certain infrastructure projects. Their concrete amount normally is a fixed figure or the result of a specific bargaining process between the representatives of the responsible public authority and the civil society organisations in question. In this context one has to consider an important fact: oftentimes representatives of the local political system like the mayor or some members of the civil council hold important positions in the boards of the local associations. As local political elites they thereby link – at a personal level – the interests of local government and local associations. Certainly it may happen that these interests come into conflict (Timm-Arnold/Löffler 2013, p. 202; Anderwald 2013, pp. 21-22).

Voluntary work directly organised by public entities, generally it is of *no practical importance* in Austria. But there are *two essential exceptions*. The first one relates to the system of voluntary fire brigades. Legally being part of the municipal administration, the fire-brigades work especially in small and medium-sized municipalities exclusively with volunteers. Their extremely high degree of mobilisation enables them to ensure a dense and nationwide network of service points. Additionally the members of the fire brigades are not only responsible for fire prevention and fighting they also carry out other activities in the common interest. The members of the civil council represent the second exception. Elected for a mid-term period (mostly for five years) they carry out multiple and various functions in the local political system. Consequently a long-lasting, time-consuming and hardly calculable voluntary work is linked to their activities.

As to the integration of citizen engagement in the processes of co-decision, co-design and co-evaluation, a comprehensive picture of the activities in the Austrian municipalities has not yet been established. However, analysing the recent volumes of journals that explicitly address local government institutions (especially “Österreichische Gemeindezeitung”, “Kommunal” or “Eurokommunal”) we find a number of short articles putting their focus on *singular activities*. These are often orientated towards international, mostly German, examples. Although the activities increase in Austria they do not have the significance they have already attained in other European countries (Hellrigl 2013, pp. 80-81).

## 2. Current challenges for civic engagement

In Central Europe we are currently able to observe some challenges that put the traditional structures of citizen engagement increasingly into question. Regarding the concrete Austrian situation three of them seem to be very important.

The first challenge concerns the *ongoing changes in voluntarism* and the *styles of voluntary work*. Until 2006 a number of Austrian surveys revealed a decline in volunteering. Informal voluntary work was more impacted than the formal type (BMASK 2009, p. 176.). However, according to recent statistics a moderate trend reversal may have happened in the last six years (BMASK 2013, pp. 9-11). Even more important is the fact that voluntary work continues to change “its face”. More and more people “shy away” from a long lasting and time-consuming commitment and favor engagements for which the demands of time and content are calculable. The German scientific literature speaks of “donations of time” (Helmig/Boenigk 2012, pp. 116-117; Urselmann 2014, p. 2) to distinguish them from the traditional (and time lasting) forms of volunteering. These “new” forms are increasingly influenced by the self-interest of the volunteers and in line with their personal biography. Relationships to institutions lose importance and the volunteers switch more often between several organisations than they did in former times (More-Hollerweger 2014, pp. 306-307). The altered situation in Austria apparently mirrors developments reported from other countries (Vantilborgh et al. 2011, p. 647).

The *rising public debt* represents a second serious challenge. It requires a sustainable consolidation of public finances (Hellrigl 2013, p. 69; Walk 2014, p. 198). In this connection an increasing citizen engagement is considered to be a useful path to reduce budget deficits, for instance if some tasks in the common interest can be re-delegated to civil society organisations (More-Hollerweger/Rameder 2013, pp. 394-395). At the same time the capacity of municipalities to subsidise these organisations gets more and more tight (Bogumil/Holtkamp 2010, pp. 394 and 399).

Thirdly an increasing part of citizens chose *modified ways* to organise themselves and to *speak out politically*. They do not join the traditional political parties any more but try to influence political decisions by engaging themselves case by case in time-limited projects and spontaneous grassroots movements (Kamlage 2013, p. 12). That does not mean that the traditional forms of policy making are completely obsolete but they are not sufficient to mobilise and interest all the citizens in certain policy issues.

### 3. Consequences and possible future paths

The aforementioned trends indicate that the traditional structures of civil engagement have to change – at least partly. Where the rate of civic engagement declines persons responsible possibly adhere too much to these traditional forms. As a consequence we have to ask how not only local governments but also local civil society organisations can be responsive to these challenges. The following pages present four ideas for special measures that could be promising future paths and aim to put them on discussion, namely

- to increase the integration of civic engagement in processes of co-decision, co-design and co-evaluation;
- to make more use of the so called “time-donations” in processes of co-production;
- to take supplementary approaches in backing citizen engagement;
- to increase the cross-linkage of voluntary work and donations.

#### *Increase the integration of civic engagement in processes of co-decision, co-design and co-evaluation*

The activities of co-decision, co-design and co-evaluation are normally carried out temporarily in the framework of certain well-defined projects. Thus we can assume that they comply well with the new forms of citizen engagement and expect that the Austrian communities increase the use of these forms of citizen participation.

A concrete management tool, increasingly applied in the Austrian townships, is the so-called “*Bürgerrat*” (“*wisdom council*”). Between twelve and sixteen citizens, randomly selected, meet on two successive days to discuss a certain issue of local policy and aim to develop some concrete recommendations for the civil council. By using this tool, local government appeals predominantly to citizens that do not participate in the traditional fields of political work. To ensure an open-minded discussion, representatives of local government or policy are at first not involved. The results of this workshop are presented to a wider public through a forum called “*Bürgercafé*“ and afterwards transferred to a special feedback group composed of local government and the local political parties’ representatives. Finally the proposals are submitted to the municipal council (Hellrigl 2013, pp.76-80; Stainer-Hämmerle 2014, pp. 3-5).

In fact the members of the council are not bound to the submitted proposals so that the procedure described above *legally* has only a *deliberative* character (Hellrigl 2013, p. 77). However, a mayor who is directly elected by the people *politically* faces a certain pressure to comply with these proposals. At least he has to explain his reasons for not implementing them. Furthermore a successful implementation of excellent ideas strengthens his own position in the local political system and increases his chances of re-election (Timm-Arnold/Löffler 2013, p. 201).

For some citizens their active participation in a planning process may be the gateway to being involved as a co-producer later on. Innovative forms of *neighbourhood help* are notable in this context. They could get an additional impetus if they are systematically connected with certain forms of *participatory budgeting* (Sintomer/Herzberg/Röcke 2010), *district budgets* above all. With the exception of one little Upper Austrian town, named Vorderstoder, this form of deliberative democracy does not appear in the Austrian landscape and is not yet established.

*Make more use of the so called “donations of time” in processes of co-production*

The current development towards the so-called “donations of time” can nearly be considered as a “mega-trend” that mirrors fundamental transformations in the Austrian society. So organisations should make more use of this type of volunteer engagement, public entities as well as civil society organisations. However the different organisations have *different starting points*.

*Professionalised* non-profit organisations have the ability to create some kinds of voluntary work that shows some regularity but limits the volunteers’ time expenditure to a few hours per week or even month. Reading the newspaper to elderly people in retirement homes represents a good example, promoting the language skills of immigrants by special training programmes another one. Compared with the local societies and clubs they combine this volunteer engagement with paid work and thereby counterbalance temporary fluctuations of the first. They have the opportunity to establish a professional volunteer management that takes care of the coordination of volunteers’ activities. Consequently many Austrian non-profit organisations are able to make use of the rising “donations of time”. They therefore invest considerable amounts in the development of a corresponding infrastructure and at the same time strengthen their strategic position in the (local) competition for volunteers.

On the contrary the *local clubs and societies* are confronted with another situation. As already stated above they are based on a number of positions requiring that some volunteers are willing to execute a time-consuming and hardly calculable voluntary work. One may for instance think of people holding leadership positions in the board of civil society organisations, like chairman or voluntary chief financial officer, but also of people working in certain executive fields like the volunteer coach of a youth soccer team for example does. To emphasise the essential fact: local societies and clubs cannot really benefit from a possibly increasing potential of “donations of time“ offered by their members or third parties, if they cannot keep some individuals available that coordinate these contributions in an effective way.

As a result obviously two developments gain ground in these organisations: on the one side they address more and more the *generation “55 plus“*, meaning people who have already retired or are to be pensioned in a conceivable period. This strategy seems to be reasonable in so far as this part of the Austrian population continues to grow. On the other side the question is increasingly discussed, if some time-consuming activities should be *connected with financial contributions* in the future. As a consequence the volunteer engagement in question would *no longer be pure*. In fact, a gradual transformation process has already begun in that financial contributions are paid for certain activities as so-called “Spesenersatz”. Since in reality they often do not only cover the expenses the paid amount represents rather a sort of remuneration. To be sure, it is usually not market-based. This strategy may lead us to some delicate problems. Firstly, it could evoke a phenomenon of motivational crowding out (Gmür 2010). Secondly, it probably necessitates a fundamental renewal of the organisational structures and thirdly, it is limited by the financial resources of the clubs’ disposal and brings us up to the question how the associations could increase the latter.

To complete the picture we have to note that at the moment voluntary work does not play *any remarkable role* in Austrian public entities. Social welfare services, cultural organisations and recreation facilities, often organised as public corporations, have not made efforts in this field yet. As an alternative they collaborate with private non-profits. In the state of Upper Austria the

Red Cross for example recruits volunteers that are brought into action in the state's retirement homes later on.

*Take supplementary ways in backing citizen engagement*

When Austrian municipalities back volunteer engagement and civil society organisations traditional structures still prevail. However modified manifestations of volunteerism require new approaches, special municipal offices or local volunteer agencies for example (Jakob 2010, pp. 236-239).

The first alternative describes a *separate office* of the municipal administration, equipped with paid staff and maybe implemented as a legally autonomous organisation owned by local government. To name one Austrian pioneer in this field we can take the city of Feldkirch, situated in the state of Vorarlberg, and its "office for volunteering" (this term is a direct translation of the German name "Büro für Ehrenamt") for example. This institution bears a wide range of activities in the fields of special services, backs the local associations in legal affairs, public relations and the coordination of activities, connects volunteers and organisations and offers training programmes (Duelli 2011, pp. 10-11; for details see [www.feldkirch.at/rathaus/buero-fuer-ehrenamt/asdf](http://www.feldkirch.at/rathaus/buero-fuer-ehrenamt/asdf)). Although this pioneer initiative has attracted a lot of attention in the Austrian media and even won awards it has remained unique to date. A reasonable explanation for this astonishing fact could be that the traditional forms of financial subsidies incur variable expenses that can be easily reduced in times of budget deficits, whereas an institution like the "office for volunteering" generates fixed costs, at least to a certain degree.

*Volunteer agencies* represent another way to back civic involvement. Legally independent they are often subsidised by local government. Very popular and widespread in Germany this sector of volunteer infrastructure is already growing in Austria and therefore "under construction". In this context we are able to put a glance on the volunteer center "Tu Was-Zentrum für Ehrenamt Schwaz", serving as a general platform for voluntary work in a little Tyrolean township named Schwaz. The description of its tasks shows similarities to that of the office of volunteering in the city of Feldkirch (for details see [www.tu-was-schwaz.at](http://www.tu-was-schwaz.at)). Therefore, the center provides special services, promotes the cross-linking of associations, carries out some activities of public relations and offers special training programmes to volunteers. To bring volunteers and organisations together it also maintains a so-called "market for volunteers". Most of the commitments tendered by this institution demand a regular expenditure of time that is however limited to one to five hours per week. Established as an association by law some high-ranking representatives of local politics hold leading positions in its board whereas daily business is operated by a salaried manager.

There are also volunteer agencies in larger cities like Vienna, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Linz. Analogously to German examples (Jakob 2010, p. 238) they have various areas of activity so that a standard model does not exist. However many of these institutions are currently confronted with the challenge of *ensuring stable funding*. Since most civil society organisations as well as the different activities of informal civic commitment derive benefit from a volunteer agency we should ask, if municipal subsidies have to be increasingly concentrated on this field. Additionally, some volunteer agencies also attract private corporations to support the activities through donations and sponsoring (Jakob 2010, p. 239).

### *Increase the cross-linkage of voluntary work and private donations*

For many people voluntary work can substitute donations and vice versa – over time and according to their personal biography. Consequently if citizens are not able to work as volunteers for whatever reasons, they are often willing to support organisations and special projects through donations.

In this context *community foundations* constitute an excellent way to combine voluntary work and private donations. They pool capital together in a basic fund and at the same time they offer the opportunity to mobilise voluntary work and donations for specific projects. For this purpose they can apply the different instruments of traditional and modern fundraising and address individuals and corporations equally (Nährlich/Hellmann 2013). They can initiate public private collaborations between themselves and local government and maintain (or support) a volunteer center.

Although community foundations clearly represent an excellent way to activate citizen engagement, these institutions are completely lacking in Austria. Austrian scientists have two main explanations for this astonishing situation: the culture of philanthropy in general and the fiscal incentives for donations in particular both are insufficient (Strachwitz/Schober/Lichtsteiner 2013, pp. 16, 17 and 20). The latter argument is extraordinary important and makes an Austrian specialty clear. Global tax deductibility for charitable donations has not yet been implemented in Austria. On the contrary this fiscal privilege is reserved to some types of contributions in the field of science, emergency aid, international development assistance, benevolent institutions and – even more curiously – for some selected institutions owned by the state itself. Other very important fields of the non-profit sector like the various cultural institutions and the sports clubs do not have the opportunity to benefit from tax deductibility. In this way the state itself generates a “two-class-society” among the civil society organisations and distorts their brisk competition for donations (Andeßner 2012, pp. 36-37).

## **IV. Discussion and conclusions**

The institutions of the market-sector, the state and its administration and civil society cooperate to provide services in the common interest. In Austria, some forms of such cooperation have a long tradition of integrating civic engagement. However, due to the social transitions described above, it seems necessary to search for modified and innovative procedures to make use of it in a more differentiated way.

As another consequence of this development the relations between the institutions involved (informal groups, local clubs and associations, non-profit organisations and public units) *could shift*. In this context especially the landscape of local clubs and associations could experience a *more radical transformation process* than expected. One part of them could *remain intact*, possibly using new practices in mobilising and binding volunteers, another part could completely *disappear* and finally a third part could continue to *professionalise* and eventually metamorphose to local social enterprises owned by innovative social entrepreneurs. The latter use these organisations at the same time as their source of income and for realising some idealistic missions.

Some institutions like participatory budgeting, volunteer agencies or community foundations, already well-known and implemented in Germany, are *widely lacking* in Austria. The reasons for this fact have not yet been sufficiently investigated. Does it indicate a lack of knowledge, simple disinterest or mutual reservations on the side of the responsible representatives or unfavourable framework conditions? Or does the scientific reflection perhaps lag behind the practical life in the Austrian townships?

As mentioned above the transitions in voluntary work and civic commitment require from the communities new services and considerable investments in infrastructure at times when their financial scope often gets tighter and tighter. How can the municipalities – with regard to eventual cut backs of their budgets – finance these investments? Are special forms of public private partnership able to co-finance them and in which way should they be conceptualised?

Furthermore, increasing private funds for common purposes is not only a question of professional fundraising but also of the *legal regulations*. In this context, the current tax law incentives in Austria seem to be insufficient and therefore the statutory provisions are in *urgent need of reform*.

With respect to the necessary fiscal consolidation a *special area of tension* opens: On the one side the different forms of civic engagement need assistance by local government. On the other side there is a considerable risk that local government considers citizen involvement and local civil society organisations as the “fill-in of public deficits“ (Sandberg/Embacher 2014, pp. 30-38; Walk 2014, p. 198). Local government would not aim at co-operation at eye-level but at maintaining a given asymmetrical relation of power also in times when public budgets decline. For this reason such a behavior is very short-sighted and would in the long term result in a situation in which citizens abandon their commitments in favor of other spare time activities (Bogumil/Holtkamp 2010, p. 397).

Additionally, with regard to the concrete participation management different models of (*context*) *governance* will partly complement the hierarchical forms of decision making and governance. If we want to proceed along this path the roles of the local public servants consequently would have to change, away from the role of the executer and navigator towards the role of an initiator, facilitator and process owner. So we also have to ask if the local politicians and government employees are ready to accomplish such a change of roles and which barriers must be surmounted.

Finally we can state that with regard to local public governance and the collaboration between citizens and local governments in Austria *a number of open questions* remain. They challenge scientific research as well as the practical life. Although this paper refers in some fields to the results of empirical studies, their consequences and the proposed possible responses to the given challenges are widely formulated as *ideas*. So the empirical research to assess their real impact and to transform the ideas to real concepts is still missing. In this context the present paper aims to indicate some *basic directions*.

In some fields of civic engagement Austria lags behind the Anglo-Saxon nations or Germany. At the same time this situation generates the opportunity to learn from their experiences to avoid some mistakes or missteps and to search for *procedures* that adequately consider the current circumstances in Austria mentioned above.

Looking at innovative procedures in citizen engagement and citizen participation the state of *Vorarlberg* – regarding the surface the smallest and the second least populous – is leading among the federal states in Austria. It may or may not be coincidence that the state is situated close to Switzerland where forms of direct democracy and citizen participation have already been a constitutive part of the political system for a long time. Specialised journals report on various examples of *dialogue-orientated citizen participation* and *innovative procedures in the backing of volunteers* and civil society organisations on both state and local level. In 2012 the state went so far as to enshrine the promotion and encouragement of citizen participation explicitly in *its constitution* (Art. 1 (4) Constitution of the state Vorarlberg). Maybe these activities will be trend-setting for whole Austria.

If citizens are required to help shape further on (or in some cities and towns increasingly) the local community by being directly involved in citizen participation or the provision of services, not only the traditional ways of voluntary work or philanthropic activities have to be complemented by innovative procedures. In fact we have to identify how the traditional system of representative democracy in Austria can be optimally complemented by instruments of direct *participative democracy*. Mere cherry picking seems to be not enough. In a country where the spirit of the former Austrian empire and its bureaucracy still continues to have a certain influence on people, local government presumably has to be *re-invented* in a certain sense, at least in part.

## Zusammenfassung

*René Clemens Andeßner; Bürgerengagement und lokale Public Governance in Österreich – Traditionen, aktuelle Herausforderungen und Zukunftswege*

*Lokale Public Governance; Bürgerengagement; Freiwilligenarbeit; Öffentliche Dienstleistungsnetzwerke; intersektorale Zusammenarbeit*

*Ein fundamentaler Wandel im Ehrenamt und in der Freiwilligenarbeit, die steigende öffentliche Verschuldung und veränderte Formen der politischen Artikulation stellen die traditionellen Strukturen des bürgerschaftlichen Engagements vor neue Herausforderungen. Sie erfordern neue Modelle und Vorgangsweisen, welche die bisher gewählten zumindest ergänzen. Mit einem spezifischen Blick auf österreichische Verhältnisse stellt der vorliegenden Beitrag vier mögliche Zukunftswege zur Diskussion: die verstärkte Integration von Bürgerinnen und Bürgern in Prozesse der Ko-Planung, -Entscheidung und -Evaluation, die verstärkte Nutzung von so genannten Zeitspenden in der Ko-Produktion, innovative Formen in der Förderung von Bürgerengagement und die verstärkte Integration von Freiwilligenarbeit und Spenden.*

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