
Civic projects as social incubators in shrinking small towns – the case of Weißwasser / Upper Lusatia

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Abstract

Keeping in mind that the public resources to support social and cultural activities in Germany were reduced to a minimum, hope awakens that civic engagement might substitute public service provision. This paper starts with a discussion on the demands and incentives given by the German politics to promote civic engagement and this will be reflected by the reality especially in small towns at the shrinking periphery. Special attention is given to the youth, young women and migrants who are expected to have high potentials for being social creators of urban culture and lifestyle and being collectively active. Still, a research gap exists about the commitment in voluntary work of these three groups. The presentation discusses first findings and answers following questions: Which motivations for engagement do young women, migrants and the youth have? Which constraints and incentives do exist for those being active and which value is added to the urban society and urban diversity? Against the background of massive budget cuts in public services the German politics promote civic engagement, especially in shrinking rural regions. The support of volunteers is mainly given in non-monetary ways. Enabling conditions should be primarily fostered through support and advice of the volunteers. At the same time, support is also appreciated by those who invest their leisure time for the civic engagement, especially when appreciation comes from and during their voluntary work. This recognition "in between" is considered more important than an institutional allowance (Bischoff et al, 2015). However, for the youth, the young women and the migrants other challenges for civic engagement are decisive.

The civic engagement of young people between 14 and 24 years is considered as short-term commitment, mainly because they often leave their home town for education and better job opportunities elsewhere. Further, time constraints during phases of education and entry-level jobbing are considered as reasons for less engagement (Enste et al, 2012). Yet, the stimulation of young people's engagement in their home town is supposed to give a positive image and attachment to home places, and thus, to facilitate a return after education and work experiences.

Young women between 25 and 30 years are less present in the ecologies of voluntary work in German small towns. It is estimated that, similar to the youth, time constraints between education and job entry are the predominant reason for less engagement (Enste et al, 2012), especially for young mothers, who also have to combine family foundation with career development. Nonetheless, young women have high potential in their home town due to a long-term perspective and their social networks.

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The migrants should be differentiated into return migrants, internal migrants and international migrants. All three types have high potential to create a town more diverse as they bring different perspectives, experiences and cultures from other parts of Germany and the world. This group is estimated to appreciate civic engagement to get to know the new culture and society and to get (re)integrated into the old/ new home town.

The case study town of Weißwasser had been shrinking from formerly 37.000 inhabitants end of the 1980s to 17.000 inhabitants today and an ageing urban society remained. The small town has to deal with the consequences like a loss in tax revenues and purchasing power, followed by a reduced public budget and skilled employees at the town administration. Hence, the town administration faces difficulties to provide even basic public services and consequently had to cut on the voluntary services for youth and social work and cultural activities. More than ever, the town administration depends on collective activities and civic engagement of the urban society. However, human and social capital is widely missing for a vital civic engagement. Nevertheless, most of the active people are organized in local associations, primarily in sports.

In the project "Co-creating the Town", supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), initiators of the three above mentioned target groups (youth, young women, migrants) had been mobilized to bring in ideas for civic engagement projects that are now being implemented. These initiators observed an obvious demand in Weißwasser, mainly in the field of culture, sharing of information, networking, child and youth work, and awareness-raising towards environment and greening the town.

Seven civic small scale civic engagement projects were started by the inhabitants of Weißwasser. The diverse initiators' structure brings different perspectives on the town into the project. Depending on the initiators' motivation to launch a voluntary project different types of initiators could be observed. Their motivation is influenced either by community spirit, self-will, or by both. Some initiators combine their work experiences with the civic engagement to gain more and diverse experiences (self-will). For other initiators the compensation of missing public services is the motivation to add value to the urban society (community spirit). For almost all initiators the predominant driver for their voluntary work is to mobilize more people who use and acknowledge their offer. However, in voluntary work the challenge, particularly for young mothers, is to find an appropriate balance between work time spent on paid work, voluntary project, family and leisure time.

In the long run the project "Co-creating the Town" aims at finding ways of continuation and integration of these citizen projects into the urban society and to stimulate more citizens to become active in co-creating their town. For that, a town administration is necessary which acts as enabler and supports citizens in their engagement towards satisfaction of lacking needs of the society.

Keywords: civic engagement, actors' landscape, motivation for engagement