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HOW TO MOVE ON? COLLECTIVE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN THE CITY-REGION OF VIGO, SPAIN

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Introduction

State sponsorship of economic and social programmes and projects has become replaced by delivery of these through partnerships involving both governmental and non-governmental organisations and other actors, and are increasingly approached through collective, neo-endogenous action, which builds upon the notion of cooperative social relationships and collaborative planning. Building upon Healy (2004) Shucksmith (2010) argues this includes horizontal and vertical integration. In spatial planning this is interpreted in terms of place-shaping, referring to “how action now can shape future socio-spatial relations” (Shucksmith, 2010:6). Following Healy’s relational conceptualisation of spatial planning in terms of “place as a social construct, continuously co-produced and contested” (ibid) Shucksmith argues that theoretical governance frameworks demand the state to support the empowerment of rural communities, and point to the role of strategic plans. Although studies identify difficulties with the application of a planning approach in situations in which policy and planning *do not* include capacity building objectives there has been paid limited attention to this phenomenon. The neglect of grassroots organisations and interrelated limited vertical integration recently has been confirmed for the city-region of Vigo in Galicia, Spain, in a stakeholder meeting organised within the EU FP7 SUPURBFOOD project (Domínguez García et al., 2015). In the context of this project we examine how local mobilisation is institutionally supported in a

context in which a central government and lower levels of public administration do not create such a supportive governance context. The central research question is how hybrid actors cooperate within a territory, and how strategic plans at different levels conflict and therewith constrain the empowerment of rural communities.

Rather than focusing on the programme and projects of the state we focus on the programme and projects of a group of local actors and analyse a governance model and resilient strategy in a commonly managed area, in which decision-making on land-use is in hands of the local group itself. The case study is on an environmental programme. In the next section we situate the case study, after which we will further discuss the institutional capacity of this group to realise its objectives.

Case study

Central in the paper is green space that is “actively protected, managed and in some cases is restored” (Benedict and McMahon, 2006:2), more in particular the ecosystem services of relevance for human wellbeing (Barthel et al., 2013) and considered an import means to deliver multiple sustainability and health benefits to the urban population (Forster and Getz Escudero, 2014). We adopt a grounded theory approach that we apply in the emerging spatial identity of the city-region (van der Schans and Wiskerke, 2012).

In the city-region of Vigo (14 municipalities, around 480,000 inhabitants in an area of 749 square km land-use opportunities differentiate from municipal parks to scattered private kitchen gardens and ‘commons’ managed by ‘Comunidades de Montes Veciñais en Man Commun’ (CMVMCs: Associations of the Commons). Decision-making processes on the design and optimisation of green space differ with the entities. In the area, among the most advanced strategies in terms of cooperative social relationships and collaborative planning are the CMVMCs, in which ‘comuneiros’ (neighbours) commonly own and together plan, manage and benefit from the communal land. In the CMVMC Teis environmental protection is key objective. The CMVMC was founded in 1998 and manages 45.8 hectares of Monte (non-arable land often covered by trees, scrub and brushwood), situated a few kilometres from the city centre it is a continuum of the city where high-rise buildings give gradually step to small houses and a more ‘rural’ urban fringe. The area has suffered the negative pressure of infrastructures such as a highway and high-tension lines crossing the area, and the appropriation of part of the area by the Vigo Zoo and sport facilities.

The case study consists of several interviews with representatives (president and secretary) of the neighbourhood community, participation in public events organised by the CMVMC Teis, their participation in two international SUPURBFOOD seminars in Vigo and in one of the sessions at the SUBURBFOOD project's final seminar organised as part of the ICLEI Resilient Cities conference 2015 in Bonn, Germany.

Findings

Since 1998 neighbours implement a strategic plan that aims to replace Black Acacia (*Acacia melanoxylum*) and *Pinus pinaster* resulting from forestation policies of the past decades (Domínguez García and Soto, 2012; Swagemakers et al., 2014). The replacement consists of chestnut trees (*Castanea sativa*), autochthonous oaks (*Quercus robur*), and local species as cherry trees, birch, willow, laurel, holy trees, and European rowan. The CMVMC reinvests 75% of its turnover (mainly forestry activities) supplemented with subsidies in Monte, thereby prioritising ecologic and environmental functions and the recovery of ethnographic patrimony. The CMVMC Teis has gained terrain to the otherwise rapidly expanding Acacia. Over 25 hectares have been reforested with local varieties. In order to meet objectives in the strategic plan the CMVMC Teis collaborates with local and international environmental protection organisations. In its daily preservation activities it e.g. includes schools and other type of neighbours associations. Until today it mainly meets resistance of local and regional public administrations, which hampers the optimisation of land-use in line with the objectives in the strategic plan. This indicates a lack of vertical integration.

Future research could aim at the identification and assessment of the impact of the different activities and the functions of green space to uphold the health of the ecosystems to provide ecosystem services (Anonymous, 2012): next to the recovery of traditional tree plantations include local climate and carbon sequestration, the prevention of soil erosion, improvement of soil fertility, and the protection on local flora and fauna more in particular, among others a salamander (*Chioglossa lusitanica*) that depends on small creeks with clear water in the case study area, and is in danger of extinction.

Beyond the action of this local group the case serves as a model for shaping future socio-spatial relations in more remote rural areas in Galicia. For this to happen further institutional support should be built on the dynamics in the case study. Following Shucksmith (2010:7), a full paper could analyse in detail the institutional capacity of actors in terms of knowledge

resources (intellectual capital; local and expert knowledge), relational resources (trust and social understanding built up through interaction), and mobilising capacities (the capacity to act collectively). Although interviews provided us with first insights on institutional capacity building in a diffuse power context, the space in this short paper is limited to report on this into more detail.

Concluding remarks

A lesson learnt from this case study is the need for supportive programs that—next to having an orientation on innovative ‘comuneiros’ as in the case study—involve non-governmental as well as governmental organisations and other actors in collective, neo-endogenous action. In the case study, support from governmental organisations remains limited.

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