

How to Decide on What to Do?

Local Decision-Finding Processes On Transition Processes

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In politics, there is an abundance of ideas and opinions on what has to be done. Discussions on urban sustainability are a good example. The term “sustainability” refers, amongst others, to dynamic and resilient cities, low-carbon energy systems, zero-growth economies, green growth and smart cities. These notions are potentially contradictory and, so far, no generally accepted guiding framework has arisen to provide a clear orientation on what to do or even how to decide on what to do.

In this paper we want to argue that, against the backdrop of recent developments in the governance of urban areas, it is important to agree on ways of decision-finding and decision-making regarding urban transitions. Following our line of argument, we want to point out that the content is not the only important matter: the question of the process is at least of equal importance, i.e. who we should ask about what to do and in which way relevant actors are involved in discussion processes.

To this end, we want to put forward ideas on how to discuss the questions of sustainability and transition, as well as the relevant criteria, which may be helpful in deciding if such a discussion process may be called democratic. However, we do not intend to lead a purely theoretical debate, rather we want to use empirical research results from six local decision-finding processes on alternative energy plants in order to show how political processes are carried out today. We are also interested in suggesting what may be changed in the current way decisions are made on issues relevant to urban transitions so as to achieve a better understanding on how political processes should be carried out.

Democratic Decision-Making: What Is Actually Democratic?

In recent years, local governments have been under pressure in Europe. The new challenges can be illustrated in the planning and siting decisions which are made against the background

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of the much debated transition to alternative energy forms (Renn et al 2014). Citizens want to have a say in these decisions and around one quarter of the planned projects in Austria are not implemented, causing large sums of money to be wasted in unsuccessful planning processes.

Most people agree that decisions on political issues should be made in democratic ways. However, they might not agree on what democratic means.

In the modern debate on democratic theories, two main theoretical groups are distinguished – theories of representative democracy and theories of direct democracy. From the representative-theoretic point of view, the role of citizens is limited to electing their representatives, and the legitimacy of decisions made by these representatives is based on the act of voting. In contrast, theories of direct democracy assign citizens a more active role in the decision-finding- and decision-making-process and are shaped by two main traditions – participatory democracy and deliberative democracy (Biegelbauer/Hansen 2011).

According to the theory of participatory democracy, the aggregated opinions of all citizens are the source for the legitimacy of decisions. In participatory decision-finding processes, citizens have the opportunity to express their opinions, and their views are taken into account, so that each position is considered in the decision made (Weber 2012). Accordingly, decision-making by referendum leads to the most legitimate result possible, whereas a decision by representatives can only be justified by practical reasons, i.e. regarding large political units.

Deliberative democracy does not pay so much attention on the inclusion of every citizen in the decision-finding process, nor does it understand referendums as a legitimate way of decision-finding. Instead, according to the principle of deliberation, dialogue-oriented processes promoting the exchange of the so-called uninformed opinions and views stand in the centre of deliberative decision-finding. The hereby initiated mutual learning allows the shaping of informed opinions which should lead to a consensus (Held 2006, Landwehr 2012).

So in opposition to a participatory understanding, the decision made by deliberation is not just an aggregate of uninformed opinions, but qualitatively better decisions are possible, if they are based on a mutual dialogue and learning process grounding their legitimacy.

Of course, finding a consensus takes time and generates costs, and it is even contested whether a consensus on political issues is possible. Therefore, some authors take into account the possibility of decision-finding by referendums – at least in terms of political practice and as long as deliberation precedes these referendums (Held 2006, LeDuc 2015). Therefore, deliberative processes are seen as a precondition for the legitimacy and acceptance of direct democratic decision-finding by referendums (Nanz/Leggewie 2016).

Now we would like to discuss a set of factors useful for evaluating decision-making processes, which in turn are necessary for the transition to sustainable cities.

Based on these theoretical points of view, a distinction can be made between participation in the sense of shaping or co-designing a project, topic or process and participation in the sense of co-deciding a question by participating in a referendum. As we understand participation in the sense of shaping or co-designing a project, we distinguish four criteria that have to be

fulfilled by participatory decision-finding-processes (compare Biegelbauer/Kapeller forthcoming):

1. The citizens concerned by a specific problem should be given a real opportunity to take part in the discussion.
2. Communication and information cannot only take place in one direction.
3. Citizens should have the opportunity to reformulate the issue to be decided upon, according to their own perspective.
4. All groups and individuals concerned should discuss with each other as equals and those in power should be willing to take common discussion results into account.

Six Local Decision-Finding Processes On Alternative Energy Plants

In the transformation process of the European energy systems, wind power plays an important role. This is specifically the case in the eastern part of Austria, particularly in the states of Burgenland and Lower Austria, where many wind power projects have been implemented in the last sixteen years. But as such projects are often heavily contested, there is also a large number of local conflicts on siting decisions regarding these power plants.

We have selected six cases of alternative energy plants in Lower Austria, seeking high variance regarding the results of referendums, the degree of participation offered to citizens and development of the decision-finding processes. In the municipality Niederhollabrunn initially broad participation was promised; in the municipality Ladendorf, participation was reduced to information events; in the municipality Leitzersdorf, the project had a high degree of acceptance and in the municipality Lasseo, a high degree of rejection. Sometimes, projects were given a second chance after rejection, as was the case in the municipality Göllersdorf.²

These cases have been investigated by mass media- and document-analysis in a first step, and in a second step expert interviews with mayors, operating companies and members of citizens' initiatives have been made.

The analysis of the decision-finding processes showed that citizens had to struggle in order to play a role going beyond being only recipients – otherwise participation offers were the result of the special situation in a community. In most cases, the general procedure was the presentation of a project by the mayor and the operating company, at a time when no more significant modifications to the project were possible. Citizens were given the opportunity to participate in information events, which should convince them of the already planned projects. In order to have more influence on the projects, citizens' initiatives were founded to articulate citizens' views and interests. The following rise of critical voices and the contesting information provided by citizens' initiatives lead to the perception of failed dialogues in the

² Empirical data was collected in the context of the MA thesis „Infrastrukturkonflikte und Demokratie auf Gemeindeebene. Eine Analyse von sechs Fallbeispielen zu Konflikten um Windkraftprojekte in Niederösterreich in Hinblick auf Partizipation und Entscheidungsfindungsprozesse“ by Sandro Kapeller (Institute for Political Science, University of Vienna, 2016).

eyes of those in charge. As a way out of this situation either mayors proposed referendums or citizens' initiatives urged referendums to stop the unwanted projects.

Participation in these cases was generally characterized by a lack of esteem for citizens' views and interests – characterizing opponents as NIMBYs (Not-In-My-Backyard) driven by envy or resentment, while not really offering citizens more options than to be for or against an already planned project. And as the main aim was to achieve acceptance by the citizens, participation processes were set up in the shape of information events, in which participation is not much more than a token (Arnstein 1969).

In that sense, citizens' initiatives reported that their arguments and views were not addressed and that their attempts to reformulate the political question – regarding the conditions a project should fulfil, how projects would influence life quality or economy (i.e. tourism) in the municipality, or if the usage of the expected revenues makes sense – were not successful. Furthermore, critical views were portrayed as harmful for a dialogue.

Many referendums were close calls and additional problems arose:

First, the attempt to end the decision-finding process by a referendum worsened the already problematic dialogue and affected the community. As the decision-finding process is geared towards the outcome of a referendum, the conflicting actors find themselves in election campaigns and tend to become very emotional about the projects and scandalize the rivals. Furthermore, those against a particular project find their views and interests potentially ignored by political representatives and in the referendum their last or main chance to advance their interests.

Second, the results of referendums showed little benefit for the decision-finding process. When a project is rejected, even by a bare majority, mayors or local governments have no scope for implementing a project. On the other hand, if a referendum does not show overwhelming acceptance for a project, organized opponents are unlikely to give up their resistance against it, and they just change their fighting arenas. In such scenarios, citizens' initiatives tried to stop projects at the level of the courts, i.e. the legality of referendums was questioned, mayors were sued, the impartiality of experts was contested and sometimes citizens tried to intervene at higher political levels. It seems that citizens engaged in the opposition to a project have put too much effort in their political goal to accept a decision by small majority.

Actually, the only benefit for political actors in carrying out a referendum on a heavily disputed topic lies in the fact that they may not be held accountable for the decision – i.e. there is a possibility to reduce their political risk. But the hope that decision-finding processes may be speeded up by a referendum did not prove to be true, and problems throughout the implementation process did not disappear – as long as the project was not refused.

Opposing this form of decision-finding, there were cases that pointed into another direction, induced by the special situation of the local community:

In the municipality of Leitzersdorf, the mayor and his party could not decide on the project by themselves, because they had no absolute majority in the municipal council. So the mayor did not make the innovative, profitable project his own, instead he handed the planning of a project over to the municipal council. By involving the council, all parties were part of the planning process and all of them were engaged in informing the citizens about the project, and the planning process itself offered the opportunity to consider the ideas of the citizens in the framework of the project. The subsequent referendum showed that 80 % were in favour of the project.

In the municipality of Höflein, after a broad rejection of a project and a loss of trust in the mayor, the handover of power to a new mayor opened up new possibilities. The new mayor integrated the citizens' initiative and negotiated the new planning of the contested project – taking into account the interests of citizens. Subsequently, the rejection of wind power eroded and not only was the project implemented without a referendum or significant resistance, but also new projects were developed in the following years.

These two examples show, that being open to different views, being interested in a real dialogue with citizens, whose opinions are included in the planning of a project, can lead to a high degree of agreement – and thus question the need for decision-making by referendum.

In the other four cases, it turned out that, however, decision-finding by referendum was no panacea, often led to a worsening of the problems it was meant to solve and had negative effects on the interest in joint action and debate. Solutions not embedded in open dialogues are potentially preventing sustainable decisions and unsatisfying participatory processes can cause social costs: mayors stepped back, enmities between political groups emerged and sometimes communities were pulled apart.

At the same time political representatives and their views play a central role in the shaping of participatory processes. In the analysed cases, two factors proved to be of particular importance for a positive experience of participation. First, a high degree of transparency should be sought for, not only in respect to the aim and the time frame of a participatory process, but also regarding the actual potential of participants to shape a decision (compare also Smith 2009). If these points are not clearly communicated at the beginning of such a process, varying perceptions will become a burden for a common dialogue.

Second, all information regarding a project should be disseminated to the public, as well as efforts put into establishing uncontested knowledge within the process. Revealing values and basic assumptions of participants encourages discussions. Reducing political decisions to technical problems that can be dealt with by experts apparently does not work – and in the repoliticization of the discussion politicians and the process itself are in danger of losing credibility and trust.

Urban Transitions

Where does that leave us with regard to urban transitions? As we pointed out at the very beginning, we propose that with all the sometimes bewildering variety of notions linked with issues of sustainability and transitions, it is important to agree about ways of decision-finding and decision-making. If we want to promote urban transitions, we have to think about what we want to achieve, who should be included in the processes leading to the transition and who should decide about the goals and the ways in which they should be reached. Moreover, we should consider the different venues to reach these decisions in the sense of different forms of decision-making, i.e. by utilising representative-democratic institutions, instruments such as referendums or deliberative processes such as consensus conferences, planning cells, citizen juries, et cetera.

Democratic forms of decision-making, which until recently most of us in the West have thought to be sacrosanct, are currently under pressure in a number of countries - amongst those leading democracies from the Anglo-Saxon world deemed to be the forerunners of modern democracy. We will have to take care that the sometimes technocratic understanding of decision-making featured by the scientific community, which is almost always well meant, is not taken hostage by the same populist political forces, which are questioning democracies as such and which may be less well-meaning than the sustainability community. In order to counter the dangers arising from technocratic decision-making, we should be sure to always lay open the catalogue of values we have in mind, when advancing certain technological, environmental, social, political or economic measures to obtain a high level of sustainability and ultimately a transition or transformation.

Moreover, we should work with a catalogue of values, which would define the way in which we want to go forward in thinking about decision-making processes. In a minimum definition of these, the four criteria put forward here should be included, i.e. to provide everyone affected by a measure with an opportunity to take part in a discussion about it, to hold a bidirectional dialogue, to give citizens a say in the making of questions to be decided upon, to create a discussion amongst equals and to take the outcomes of these debates seriously.

We will also have to deal with the rising complexity in decision-making (Streit 2015, Biegelbauer forthcoming) caused by phenomena such as internationalization, globalization, regionalization, the functional differentiation of governments, the multiplication of “wicked policy problems” (Rittel/Webber 1973) and the cross-cutting nature of many, and especially transition-related, policy problems. This increasing complexity exists and cannot be ignored. It cannot be controlled in the traditional way, through planning, norm-setting, regulation, legislation, oversight and law enforcement, as society is now too complex to rely only on such measures.

New answers have to be given to the increasing complexity in decision-making. Decision-finding and decision-making processes should rely more on systemic thinking and on the acceptance of multiple centres of power at different levels of decision-making. Such a realization of the nature of modern society leads us towards the acceptance that urban transitions cannot be steered, but they can be afforded and invited. Instead of trying to control

the actors necessary for such a transition, they should be involved in common efforts of orientation through policy instruments such as foresight. In such a process, a number of stakeholders can take part in a mediated communication process, in which first a desirable future and second a roadmap featuring specific ways and measures on how to arrive at such a chosen future vision is developed (Wilhelmer/Nagl 2013, Dinges et al 2016).

Regardless what our answers to the questions of the transition are, we have to find democratic and inclusive forms of answering them. We should not succumb to economic and political pressures to come up with easy and technocratic solutions as a gift to society. If we can agree on the processes to be used for inclusive and democratic forms of decision-making, we may talk more easily about the differences between the scientific communities and their look at the world - simply because they are sometimes less important than they seem. And in the end, we may see more commonalities than differences amongst us.

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