

Building Bridges in municipal Governance: The Würzburg Council for the Future as a model for urban sustainability transformations?

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Abstract Amid growing social polarization and need for better knowledge-integration in policymaking, so-called ‘mini-publics’ or ‘citizen’s assemblies’ have gained increasing popularity as deliberative approaches towards sustainable transformations in cities. While most local mini-publics are initiated and implemented by civil society groups, others have been set up by local authorities. Researchers have studied bottom-up versus top-down processes related to mini-publics in cities but we know little about the mini-publics initiated by academic institutions as transdisciplinary urban projects. These mini-publics are characterized by unique expectations and perspectives among their participants and within their organizational structures, therefore we also expect a unique contribution to just cities and urban sustainability transformations.

Taking the need to better understand the potential of transdisciplinary mini-publics for sustainability transformations as a starting point, our research is centered around the citizen assembly Würzburg Council for the Future on the topic just mobility. It was conducted as cooperation between the “Bündnis Zukunftsklima” and various scientists, primarily from social sustainability science and under the umbrella of a transformation experiment of the sustainability lab (“WueLAB”) of the university of Würzburg. As such, it represents a special case in which scientists had a dual role as organizers and researchers, and in which members of the university – as the main initiator and main supporter of the project – intended to contribute not only to knowledge production but explicitly also to sustainability transitions in the city.

To analyze the potential of such a mini-public, we cover the entire process of the conceptualization and implementation of the Würzburg Council for the Future from its inception to the presentation of its recommendations in the city council. For that, we use an exploratory approach based on qualitative methods, such as participatory observations of the sessions, semi-structured interviews with team members and participants, and reflexive methods, such as a collaborative evocative autoethnography on the process of the preparation in implementation of the council. We identify and study the factors determining the success of deliberative platform like the citizen assembly Würzburg Council for Future for sustainable urban transformation. Thereby, the paper contributes to the broader discussion about whether citizens’ assemblies are a suitable form of participation to foster urban sustainability transformation that goes beyond traditional direct-democratic instruments.