

Knowledge-management and learning in the network of Austrian civil society

Social Network Analysis of the Salzburger conference of poverty

October 2005 - December 2006

A researchproject of the ARGE „Wege zur Civil Society in Österreich“ der Österreichischen Forschungsgemeinschaft

Participating institutions:

- Institut für Wissenschaftstheorie, Universität Wien
- FAS.research, Wien
- Salzburger Armutskonferenz

Realization:

DSA Dr. Martin Schaurhofer

Initial position

In Salzburg exists since 2001 the Salzburger conference of poverty which is a network of more than 30 organizations and persons. It is characterised by the fact that since its establishment it is full-time cared by a coordinator, whose position is mostly financed by the country of Salzburg and the Caritas Salzburg.

Questions

Aim of research was to find out how resources of knowledge constitute a network. It should be realized how knowledge exchange and thus organisational learning in the network of a civil society worked.

1. Forms of the organization of the network:

- 1.1. How can a network of a civil society be represented?
- 1.2. Where are the organizational strengths and weak points in the network?
- 1.3. Which co-operations with public and other participants exist?

2. Civil society as store of knowledge:

- 2.2. Which value in the work of NGOs is attributed to knowledge?
- 2.3. Which methods of the knowledge management are used?
- 2.4. How does organisational learning in the network happen?

3. Role, structures and dynamics of communication processes:

- 3.1. What needs a network of a civil society for inward-communication?
- 3.2. What needs a network of a civil society for outward-communication?
- 3.3. How can knowledge passed on (inward and outward) more efficiently?

4. Diversity in the civil society:

- 4.1. Where are the differences of the positions of organizations with different target groups and different setting of tasks?

Method

The social network analysis is a special scientific instrument for the collection and representation of all the informal communication-, information- and knowledge-streams in and between organizations (so mentioned organizational mapping). It is applied for the first time to the Salzburger conference of poverty. Due to the results of the social network analysis qualitative methods are precisely applied: Structural characteristics, knowledge management and organisational learning in the network were analyzed and psychologically explained after problem-centered interviews with the participants of the Salzburger civil society. The development of the individual research steps (production of the questionnaire, network analysis, interview manual, content analysis of the interviews) were accompanied by a focus-group, which was compound from key-participants of the civil society in Austria (one representative from Attac Austria, one from the Austrian conference of poverty, one from the Austrian Social Forum), with consideration of the diversity of gender.

Results

1. Forms of the organization of the network

The most important strength can be found in the network-character, by which the Salzburger conference of poverty can develop itself theme-focused. A further organizational strength is the very engaged co-ordinator of the conference.

2. Civil society as store of knowledge

The co-operation with public participants is highly developed. The Salzburger conference of poverty is noticed as a competent group of experts.

The need of knowledge is different because of the different objectives of the NGOs in the poverty conference. Fundamental knowledge, which does not find direct application in the areas of the own work, has a smaller value. In addition to the fact that development and need of knowledge are different, a common poverty data base is necessary for cross-linking and as a starting point for further strategies.

3. Role, structures and dynamics of communication processes

Communication outside of the network needs 20 % of the work time of the co-ordinator, this faces 30 % of the work time of communication within the network. The remaining time is given to personal knowledge acquisition, to knowledge preservation and to further organizational work.

4. Diversity in the civil society

There is a latent interest conflict between the established, classical "social institutions" (for example Caritas) and other NGOs, which are self-organized and/or are based on honorary work, a fact that brings other points of view.