

Abstract

Paper for ISTR-EMES Conference in Barcelona, 9.-12. Juli 2008

"The Third Sector and Sustainable Social Change: New Frontiers for Research"

Titel

ECO-WISEs

Work Integration Socio-economic ECO-Enterprises

Their potentials and requirements in reaching social, ecological and economical goals

Results from a current research-project on ECO-WISEs in Austria

Topic

The welfare state, liberalization, Neo-liberal policies, and the Third Sector

Or

Other dimensions

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Main idea

As for the role of Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) in the labour market, specific types of social enterprises emerged in the field of work integration. These so-called work integration social enterprises (WISEs) were identified by researchers of the PERSE project¹ as aiming *“to help poorly qualified unemployed people who are at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market. These enterprises integrate them back into work and society in general through productive activity”*.² The authors of this project analysed the performance and conditions of WISEs and formulated recommendations for policy makers. They also emphasised the need for further studies in this field in order to deliver a clear understanding of the relevance of these organisations in our society: *“In-depth studies have to be developed to better understand the role of social enterprises compared to public organisations and business in delivering social services”*.³

A special subgroup of WISEs has an environmental focus and is referred to as work integrating socio-economic eco-enterprises or ECO-WISEs. Many of these ECO-WISEs emerged in Europe during the 1980s in parallel to the demands of the labour market policy of this period and the nascent environmental movement. The goal of ECO-WISEs is to improve the inclusion of people with special needs into society, e.g. long-term unemployed people, by providing special jobs in the field of environmental sustainability. In addition, these organisations break into and develop new markets by offering new products and services (e.g. the trash design manufacturing⁴).

Over the last few years these organisations have been discovered as a strategic reserve to strengthen the environmental, social and economic pillar of society. They are seen as good practice examples to fulfil a general objective of the European Commission (EC), namely to combine social, economic and ecological trajectories in line with the concept of sustainable development. But it's a fact, that these ECO-WISEs have only marginally been investigated, so their potentials and requirements to balance the social, economic and ecological goals have remained unnoticed.

At this point a research project, analyzing the situation in Austria has its source.

¹ The EMES project titled PERSE (Socio-economic Performance of Social Enterprises in the Field of Work-Integration) was funded by the 5th Framework Programme and took place between 2001 and 2004.

² EMES (2004): *PERSE. The Socio-Economic Performance of Social Enterprises in the Field of Work Integration. Executive summary*, Belgium, p.1.

³ Ibid, p.9

⁴ www.trashdesign.at

Empirical and Theoretical Base

An analysis of the relevant contribution of ECO-WISEs to society must simultaneously include the economic, ecological and social dimension of their activities. Therefore expert-interviews with a pool of researchers, politicians and practitioners in these fields were made in order to specify the following lead questions, which will be separately analysed with a specific methodological repertoire.

- Structure: *What are the main characteristics of these organisations in Austria?* (quantitative description of the financing situation, employment situation, economic situation as well as their ecological valuation)
- Process: *How can these organisations face the needs resulting out of the downsizing of the welfare state, the crises at the labour market and the emerging environmental problems?* (qualitative case studies in ecological and economical concerns as well as in social and political concerns)
- Potentials: *What are the chances and difficulties facing ECO-WISEs in relation to the objectives of the labour market-, economic- and environmental-policy actions of the EU?* (On the basis of the research results on the Austrian Situation, effects of ECO-WISEs should be discussed on an European level)

Relevance for an international audience

Especially for the last aspect an international arena is required. The international conference of ISTR and EMES will be an ideal platform to start this process.

The presentation of the results on the Austrian situation intends to initiate a multinational discussion on ECO-WISEs.

- The presented results can give a good basis for discussions alongside the question: *Which perspectives do we have to strengthen the role of ECO-WISEs in times of globalization?*
 - They can also be an impulse for further international research activities, e.g. to consolidate the contrasts and similarities in several countries.
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Speakers:

Maria Anastasiadis, born 1973, holds a PhD in Humanities and is a member of the academic staff of the Department of Educational Science in Graz as well as at the Social Economic Research Centre in Vienna. She is specialized in research on TSOs and the labour market situation. Relevant publications are:

Letzte Hoffnung Nächstenliebe. Beitrag in GDI Impuls. Wissensmagazin für Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft und Handel. Herbst 2006, Zürich.

Anastasiadis, Maria (2006): The future of work and its end? Article in Heimgartner, Arno (Ed.): Face of research on European Social Development. Lit Verlag.

Andrea Mayr, born 1976, is a member of the academic staff of the Department of Educational Science in Graz. She has a masters degree in Educational Science. Her fields of research are participation and inclusion of disadvantaged groups.
