

Narratives in Sustainability Transformations

Case Study: Berlin Cycling Referendum

Project Description

The case study of the Berlin Cycling Referendum (CR) provides interesting insights into the role of constructing narratives and identities for achieving infrastructural change in favor of cycling. Building on the Common Ingroup Identity Model (CIIM), the study shows how the construction of a common identity among varied actor groups has been key to a citizen campaign for safe cycling infrastructure.

In November 2015, a group of cycling activists launched a campaign with 10 goals for improving cycling infrastructure, which they wanted to turn into law through direct democracy. At the time, cycling was a niche activity in Berlin, with only 15% of the total traffic volume coming from cycling. Nevertheless, the group managed to collect over 100,000 signatures for their draft law within four weeks and get 61% of Berliners on their side - how was this possible?

The issue of mobility transition has a high potential for conflict, and it is not uncommon for motorists and cyclists to be pitted against each other. Here, group membership, also known in psychology as social identity, can be an obstacle to transformation processes. The CR, however, did not fall into the "us versus them" trap, but managed to create a common identity through shared norms and identification - safe cycling for all (Becker et al. 2021).

To convince 90% of Berlin's cyclists to support the bill, the initiative developed an identity of safe cycling that reflected all subgroups, from families with children to athletes. Common values were safety, equity, participation and quality of life in the city. Previous projects to improve cycling infrastructure often failed because they only addressed one specific group (ibid.). However, the referendum activists also managed to involve road users beyond cyclists and developed concepts for public transport, city logistics and smart city developments. This made it possible to link different groups of stakeholders and their interests.

Inclusivity also dominated the CR activists' approach to networking: Avoiding the trap of falling into the risk-avoidant mindset of established NGOs (which initially opposed the CR), the campaign network comprised of weak ties among a multitude of stakeholders rather than a closer-knit network based on a more exclusive group of sporty cyclists.

In June 2018, after several intermediate steps, success was achieved: the target plans were largely implemented in the Mobility Act. We can learn from the successful referendum for processes of transformation: appreciation, inclusive norms and shared identities have the potential to bring many people together for change and successfully contribute to sustainable development.

The movement has since institutionalized in the Changing Cities association.

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Tasks

1. Read the following article:
 - Becker, S.; Bögel, P.M.; Upham, P. (2021): The role of social identity in institutional work for sociotechnical transitions: the case of transport infrastructure in Berlin, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 162, 120385, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120385>.
2. Answer the following questions:
 - Which narratives were used to promote the Cycling Referendum? Identify their scope, inclusiveness, time frame and addressees.
 - Identify Master- and Counter narratives in the urban mobility transition which are challenged or applied within this case study.
 - What are the (dis-)advantages for the CR of prioritizing weak networks?

Further Information

Read...

- RIFS-Blog entry by Dirk von Schneidemesser & Nicolina Kirby (2022): Reshaping the city – a top-down or a bottom-up process?
 - <https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/en/blog/2022/02/kiezblocks-top-down-or-bottom-up>
- Diploma thesis by Felix Leininger (2021): Die Radentscheid-Bewegung in Deutschland. Aushandlung und Umsetzung zwischen Bürger:innenengagement und kommunaler Praxis (German)
 - https://diy.vcd.org/fileadmin/user_upload/DIYII/Angebote/Abschlussarbeiten/Abschlussarbeiten/Leininger_Felix_Fidel_-_2021_-_Die_Radentscheid-Bewegung_in_Deutschland...pdf

Browse...

- Changing Cities association:
 - Homepage: <https://changing-cities.org/> (German)
 - Overview in English: <https://changing-cities.org/the-changing-cities-movement/>

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- Since 2020, Changing Cities has been campaigning for the development of “Kiezblocks” in Berlin and beyond along the lines of Barcelona's superblocks. Here, too, you can find interesting narratives to promote dissemination.
 - <https://changing-cities.org/kampagnen/kiezblocks/> (German)
 - <https://changing-cities.org/kampagnen/superblocks-bundesweit/> (German)
 - <https://www.kiezblocks.de/> (German)

Do...

- Overview of Cycling Initiatives in Germany
 - <https://www.fahrrad-initiativen.de/> (German)
- BundesRad alliance
 - brings together more than 50 cycling referendums, as well as other initiatives for the mobility transition with the goal to promote people-friendly, sustainable mobility.
 - <https://www.bundesrad.org/> (German)
- Overview of Critical Mass Protests in German Cities
 - <https://itstartedwithafight.de/critical-mass-deutschland/>
 - <https://criticalmass.de/>