

HOW CAN BOTTOM UP ACTIVISM CREATE A PUBLIC PARK: CASE STUDY OF EVOLUTION GARDEN IN ČEBOVCE (SLOVAKIA)

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Abstract

The following case study describes the ongoing process (since 2014) of creating a 1,1 ha public park via bottom-up activism in cooperation with local municipality in Čebovce (Slovakia). Čebovce is a small village with 1021 inhabitants in the south of Slovakia close to the Hungarian border surrounded by oak forests and vineyards. It has a typical valley climate, dry or moderately wet, with an annual average temperature 8.5°C and precipitation of 620 mm. The contribution describes the workflow, activities, fundraising and voluntary work during the period 2014-2024, also identifies the main formal and non-formal groups involved in the process. The selected plot, which was transformed to a public park was an illegal waste dump with a black locust stand in the central part of the village. The data were obtained from project reports of the leading NGO, which was the leader of the activities. The main function of this public park was to create an outside classroom for the local elementary school and place for relax and short-term recreation. The paper describes the strategy which was used to create and maintain this public space via bottom-up activism.

Keywords: Grassroot, low cost, NGO, public space, volunteering

Introduction

Volunteering refers to activities performed through organizations to alleviate needs in society by individuals who receive little to no monetary compensation for their efforts (Wang et al. 2017; Xu 2014). Volunteers and their activities—the latter commonly referred to as volunteering—are central elements in the lively arenas of community involvement, civil labor, and social capital (Stebbins, 2009). In smaller communities bottom-up activism occurs more often as documented by Slobodníková and Tóth (2022) on 3 case studies from western Slovakia.

Volunteer activities have been spurred by Slovakia's low interest in protecting and developing public areas and urban greenery. Certain "politics" frequently take advantage of the low participation rate in the public sphere in an effort to buy public space, altering its fundamental qualities as public areas. Due to the extraordinary sensitivity of this phenomenon, openness in negotiations and public participation in its genesis are required. Whether in an urban, municipal, or rural context, development policies are heavily influenced by the way public areas are used (Faltán, 2010). Many people want to engage in nature or ecotourism, they wish to take part in activities that may have a benefit for their local environment. There is also a rise in communal consciousness and participation in community activities (Bell et al., 2009; Tóth et al. 2014).

Grassroot organisations can have a big impact on the environment especially in smaller towns. They act as ecopreneurs, change agents for a more sustainable society (Pastakia, 1998).

Materials and methods

The subject of the study is an insight into the activity of one civic association, which acts in the design and transformation of public space in Čebovce. Čebovce is a small village with 1021 inhabitants in the south of central Slovakia close to the Hungarian border surrounded by oak forests and vineyards. It has a typical valley climate, dry or moderately wet, with an annual average temperature 8.5°C and precipitation of 620 mm (Tarábek, 1980). The investigated public space can be found in the residential area with a total area of 1,1 ha. Before 2014 the site was abandoned with illegal waste dumps and synanthropic woody and herbal vegetation. The stand consisted of species such as *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Sambucus nigra*, *Crataegus monogyna*, *Prunus spinosa*, *Prunus domestica*, *Cerasus avium*, *Juglans regia* and *Acer campestre*. The understory is synanthropic, thermophilus vegetation from the alliance *Galio-*

Alliarion (Jarolímek et al. 1997) Information were obtained from the project reports, websites, FB page and by interviewing initiatives. The main player in the processes was the civic association (CA) Jašterica Spoločnosť pre trvalo udržateľný rozvoj (Lizard Society for sustainable development) established in 2003. The long-term goals of the CA are raising of environmental awareness among the village community and preserving of old fruit varieties and landraces. The short-term goals were to engage in small grant schemes to improve biodiversity, plant trees and organize clean ups in the surroundings. The study offers an overview of the mission, objectives, main activities, and the co-design process lead by the CA, the sources of funding and the workflow in the period 2014-2024.

Results

The project of the Evolution Garden started in 2014 with a co-design meeting led by the CA with the presence of village inhabitants and the Mayor's Office. The main idea was to transform the 1,1 ha unused area into a public park with added environmental value. The master plan of the project was created using participatory planning. At the first meeting, there was a larger focus on the needs of locals and the elementary school teaching staff. In spring 2015 the CA and volunteers started to clear the area. 30% of black locust trees were removed and native trees were supported. The CA also received funding from the Grant for Optimists scheme. The Mayor's Office received funding from the Village renewal program for planting trees native trees of the Kurupina Plateau in the cleared area. For the first three years, systemic arboricide with triclopyr was used to control the black locust root suckers. These activities were done by the Mayor's Office, which was also responsible for mowing 3-6 times per year. The Mayor's Office also provided yearly funding from 2015 to 2021 for the CA. In the years 2016-2020, the main goals were: to control the black locust suckers, replant dead trees and plant new ones, installing benches, plant labels, waste bins, and wood-based concrete bird and bat houses. The number of volunteers decreased in the years 2008-2020 gradually from 30 to 7. These were mainly the members of the CA. During the COVID period, there was almost no community activity and the CA worked in an „emergency mode“. In 2022 the Mayor's Office received funding from the Green Villages scheme. With support of this scheme 54 tree specimens were planted. The first event after COVID was in 2023, which was a guided tour for locals to share awareness, of what kind of tree and plant species are growing in the Evolution Garden in cooperation with the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. This event was demanded by locals and the goal was to train volunteers to guide tourists in the future in the Evolution Garden.



Fig. 1: Visit of the local kindergarten in the Evolution garden Source: <https://skola.easypc.sk/category/338-vychadzka-ms-do-evolucnej-zahrady-2018.html>

In total during the period 2014-2024 234 tree and shrub specimens were planted in the Evolution Garden, the mortality rate of newly planted trees was 34%, caused by drought stress and mechanical damage by grass trimmers. The Mayor's Office received funding for 2 projects and the CA received 3 funded projects. In total 56 volunteers attended the weekend activities during this period counting around 1200 volunteer hours. The local elementary school and the kindergarten is using the Evolution garden for educational purposes as can be seen in **Fig. 1**. The funding altogether was 16931,64 € from which the CA received 3969,31€. The co-financing costs of the Mayor's Office were 761,18€.

All activities in the period 2014 -2024 were coordinated by the CA Lizard in close cooperation with the Mayor's Office. Without the help and support of the Mayor's Office, the project of the Evolution Garden would not have been possible.

Discussion

Our case study showed that the activity of the CA, the help of the volunteers and the support from the Mayor's Office was crucial for the establishment of the Evolution Garden and the post-establishment maintenance. Our findings were similar as the results from the case studies presented by Slobodníková and Tóth (2022). After the establishment there was relatively high tree mortality due to, drought stress and trimmer damage, which is a common problem when establishing urban greenery (Morgenroth et al. 2015). Another stress factor for newly planted trees was drought. This primary stress increased insect damage and the mortality of trees itself. This cascade effect is well described by Dale and Frank (2017). Watering was problematic, because of lack of finances, logistic problems and no water source on site. Public space is a highly socially sensitive phenomenon that requires a wider social discourse, as Falt'an (2010) notes. The most difficult task for volunteer associations wanting to improve public spaces is getting the general public interested and fostering a positive, cooperative relationship with the local municipality! In Slovakia, experts, authorities, and the general public must acquire new techniques and approaches for public space planning. Similar findings very reported by

Slobodníková and Tóth (2022). This case study provides information for further investigation into Slovakia's grass root organizations and bottom-up initiatives and participatory planning itself.

Conclusion

The case study identifies the strategy used to achieve the establishment of a public park with bottom-up activism. This process of establishment deals with many problem, which can be solved only when good cooperation between the main players exist. The CA, volunteers and the Mayor's Office as single players could not achieve such results as together. The sustainability of the project relies on a healthy cooperation of the mentioned subjects.

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Souhrn

Následující případová studie popisuje probíhající proces (od roku 2014) vytváření 1,1 ha veřejného parku prostřednictvím místního aktivismu ve spolupráci s místní samosprávou v obci Čebovce (Slovensko). Čebovce je malá obec s 1021 obyvateli na jihu Slovenska poblíž maďarských hranic obklopená dubovými lesy a vinicemi. Má typické údolní klima, suché nebo mírně vlhké, s roční průměrnou teplotou 8,5 °C a srážkami 620 mm. Příspěvek popisuje workflow, aktivity, fundraising a dobrovolnickou práci v období 2014-2024, také identifikuje hlavní formální a neformální skupiny zapojené do procesu. Vytipovaný pozemek, který byl přeměněn na veřejný park, byla nelegální skládkou odpadu s akátem v centrální části obce.

Údaje byly získány z projektových zpráv vedoucí nevládní organizace, která byla vedoucím aktivit. Hlavní funkcí tohoto veřejného parku bylo vytvořit venkovní učebnu pro místní základní školu a místo pro odpočinek a krátkodobou rekreaci. Článek popisuje strategii, která byla použita k vytvoření a udržení tohoto veřejného prostoru prostřednictvím aktivismu zdola nahoru.

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