

Application for Momentum Congress 2022

Information on the authors:

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Explanatory Note on the project:

The following abstract presents our ongoing master's thesis project in the MA programme Socio-Ecological Economics and Policy, at the University of Business and Economics, Vienna. Our project started in January 2022 and is planned to be submitted by October 2022. One of the authors is also directly involved in the researched project as former employee, current member and co-developer. We tend to categorize our project as both Praxisbericht as well as Forschungspapier, and are happy to frame it either way depending on the Momentum Board's evaluation. A presentation in English or German language is both welcomed.

Preliminary Abstract:

A transition to sustainable and resilient food production systems has been widely discussed in the past three decades. Agricultural commons (AC) have been one answer among many alternatives, to address the problems inherent to the current globalized capitalist food system. Within these alternatives a need to assure the quality of food production has emerged, and various approaches were discussed. Hence, Participatory guarantee systems (PGS) formulated an alternative method to evaluate, control and certificate AC. In this context, theory is yet to catch up with the practical transition of alternative food production systems. The aim of the study is to fill this gap by (i) contributing to the existing theoretical debates on commons and commoning and their systems of evaluation, certification and control (ii) conducting a qualitative case study on the CSA *Ouvertura*, Lower Austria (iii) developing a transformative communication strategy, including a handbook to guide PGS assessment processes. Using a transformative and participatory approach will contribute to the existing literature with practical insights and theoretical conclusions on: *How can commons evaluate, control, and certificate the(ir) commoning and common good(s) with participatory guarantee systems?*

Preliminary Introduction:

The latest Assessment Report on Climate Change of the IPCC leaves no doubt that the current system is facing a severe social and ecological crisis: “Human-induced climate change is causing dangerous and widespread disruption in nature and jeopardizing life, despite human efforts to reduce the risks” (IPCC 2022). Already more than a decade ago political ecologist Ulrich Brand (2009: 1) warned and elaborated on today’s “multiple crisis”, a term that tries to put into focus the complex and interdependent dynamics of current crisis like climate change, the crisis of migration and representation, hunger and loss of biodiversity among many others. These interlinked crises, Brand and Wissen (2012; 2017: 43) later argue, are the consequence of human’s “imperial mode of living” in capitalism’s centres, a mode of living based on capitalist societal-nature relations that enable the exploitation of nature and other humans elsewhere. Therefore, research that tries to address this multiple crisis needs to focus on systemic and encompassing alternatives that restructure and transform capitalist societal nature relations in an emancipatory and democratic way (Brand 2016: 503).

Consequentially, our following Master Thesis conducts research on one of these alternatives: The commons and commoning, forms of social organization and practices that challenge capitalist markets, modern states, and the imperial mode of living through self-governed and cooperative satisfaction of basic needs (Helfrich/Bollier 2020: 7, 19). More precisely, we research systems and processes that enable commons to evaluate, control and certificate the(ir) common practices i.e. the(ir) commoning, and their common goods. Even though participatory guarantee systems have been in place in community supported agriculture, academia is yet to keep up with the novelty. For this reason, theoretical literature on alternative modes and practices of evaluation, control, and certification for commons and commoning still need to be researched and developed. Along a case study (Yin 2017) of the community supported agriculture Overtura in lower Austria, we would thus like to research the question:

How can commons evaluate, control and certificate the(ir) commoning and common good(s) with participatory guarantee systems?

We try to understand our research question via the theoretical lens of the academic literature on commons and commoning (Ostrom 1990, Helfrich/Bollier 2015, 2020; Federici 2019), and explore the topic through a participatory and transformative research approach. We structure our thesis in three parts: First, we want to contribute to the existing theoretical debates on commons and commoning and their systems of evaluation and control. Second, we want to conduct a qualitative case study on an agricultural commons via a participatory and transformative research approach. Next to expert interviews and participatory observation, this means co-creating a participatory guarantee system with the members of Overtura, and thereby writing a practical handbook for how to implement a commoning system of control and evaluation. Finally, we aim at a transformative communication strategy of our first and second outcome to popularize our work, i.e. making it understandable and usable for other commons and the broader public through dissemination in CSA-networks and workshops.