

**Abstract**

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- Titel:** ECO-WISEs - a vehicle of sustainable development and regional innovation  
*Results from a participatory research process on strengthening the strategic position of ecologically oriented work integration social enterprises as regional actors of sustainable development*
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## ECO-WISEs - a vehicle of sustainable development and regional innovation

*Results from a participatory research process on strengthening the strategic position of ecologically oriented work integration social enterprises as regional actors of sustainable development*

### Theoretical framing and research question

Ecologically oriented Work Integration Social Enterprises (ECO-WISE) can be described briefly as regional based not-for-private-profit organisations, which improve social inclusion by providing jobs for long-term jobseekers in ecological businesses. Previous research activities<sup>1</sup> conducted in Austria indicate, that ECO-WISEs are important partners in fostering social participation and economic equality as well as in avoiding ecological exploitation (Anastasiadis, M. & Mayr, A. 2010). Having this in mind, they can be seen as prototypical for sustainable development as defined by the World Commission (1987) and for resting upon a triple bottom line approach (Elkington 1997). Therefore they can be considered as vehicle of social, economic and ecological innovation especially on regional level. But the findings of the mentioned research activities show that they do neither perceive themselves nor are perceived externally regarding their contribution to sustainable development and regional innovation. Accordingly this research project portrayed in this paper investigates and publicly demonstrates if and how ECO-WISE can open spaces for regional innovation in line with sustainable development. Thereby the author refers to results from a research process where the Delphi-Method has been adopted as a participatory research tool.

### Method

The general aim of the research project was to map future options for and with ECO-WISEs within the next 10 till 15 years in a specific region in Austria (Styria) in order to encourage their strategic position as sustainable actors and regional innovators. To develop such future prospects an opinion-forming public sphere as conceptualised by Habermas (1998) was created by adopting the Delphi Method as the methodological core approach. It can be described briefly as a foresight research tool which uses the knowledge of experts on a specific topic to invent strategies on how to deal with it in the future (Häder, 2002).

Referring to this approach a Think-Tank forum was created in which all important internal and external stakeholders of ECO-WISEs were involved such as exponents of the local government, the commercial market sector, the labour market policy, CEOs of ECO-WISEs, etc. During the loop of data generation and interpretation the Think-Tank generated future scenario, referred to them and developed alternatives. The material was investigated via a grounded theory based qualitative analysis, “figures of guiding orientations” as well as a typology on possible strategies alongside the different perspectives the representatives have provided could be discovered. The next step is to achieve a feedback from the Think-Tank Group on how they perceive and estimate the developed guiding orientations and strategy-typology in terms of a co-data-analysis. Further measures are to be identified which will support their achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereby 15 expert-interviews were made with persons from the inside and outside of the research field prior to a quantitative survey where 150 identified organisations and projects were questioned on their structural conditions whereof 60 answered.

### Outline

After describing the landscape and nature of ECO-WISEs in Austria and in the region Styria on a quantitative and qualitative basis the author will point out their specific role and their challenges in reaching social, ecological and economical goals in terms of sustainable development and regional innovation. Then she will reveal the chosen methodological design, where she has adopted the Delphi-Method as a participatory research tool. A main section of the paper will be taken by referring to selected results and experiences, which were made during the research phases. Finally drawbacks and opportunities of this approach and its outcome will be discussed.

### References

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