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Research article

## Get organized? Creating an organizational context for civil society activities in urban sustainability transitions

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## ABSTRACT

The paper addresses tensions in organizing civil society activities in urban sustainability transitions. It argues that these activities need focus to be impactful while also demanding flexibility to remain adaptive. The latter can hardly be achieved by individual organizations alone but requires closer examination of the *ecology* of organizations in which civil society actors operate. This paper contributes to the literature on the governance of urban sustainability by systematically analyzing this organizational context and its long-term dynamics. Adopting a neo-institutional lens, the paper scrutinizes civil society activities with the ‘institutional work’ approach and sheds light on how the organizational context enables changes therein. The longitudinal case study of the Local Agenda 21 in Augsburg reveals, via a mixed-method approach, how civil society actors navigate tensions by altering their organizational context. Increasing its diversity and complexity in a bottom-up process allowed them to engage in more transformative work.

### 1. Introduction

"Get Organized!" was the title of a guest contribution by Luisa Neubauer, one of the most prominent representatives of the climate movement "Fridays for Future" in the weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" (3/3/24). With this statement, she emphasizes that the long-term success of civil society actors (CSA) depends on their ability to organize themselves and consequently avoid the risk of their often-fragmented activities to dissipate. This connection between the effectiveness of CSA and their formal organization is also addressed by empirical research on urban sustainability transitions (Feola and Nunes, 2014), emphasizing that formal organization plays a crucial role to mobilize resources and anchor activities (Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021; Grandin and Sareen, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, studies point to several problems that CSA face in this regard. One fundamental issue is the tension between a focused versus a more diverse organization. On the one hand, CSA are only effective when they bundle resources and focus their activities on common goals. On the other hand, they must reflect the diversity of actors and perspectives involved in urban transitions in order to maintain democratic legitimacy (Feola and Nunes, 2014). Additionally, too much organizational focus carries the risk of smoothing over frictions and contradictions (Edwards and Bulkeley, 2018; Bulkeley, 2019), thereby ignoring the importance of dissent and

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this article: CSA for "Civil Society Actor(s)", LA 21 for "Local Agenda 21", IP for "Interview Partner(s)".

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contestation by diverse civil society activities in urban contexts (Wolfram 2016). This diversity is necessary for generating creative and innovative solutions, a capability seen as crucial for spurring urban sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016; Avelino et al., 2024).

A second related issue concerns the tension between stability and adaptability. For CSA to have a sustained impact on urban sustainability transitions, a certain permanence and stability is needed. Yet, CSA must also organize their activities in a way that they can be adapted to changing contextual conditions (Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021).

The latter seems particularly important in light of the recently shifting discourse and practice of governing urban sustainability from strategic planning to more experimental approaches. While the former focused on optimizing social, economic, and environmental conditions through long-term strategies (Vallance and Edwards, 2021), the latter aims to radically transform existing conditions through short-term interventions (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010; Nevens et al., 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2016; Wittmayer et al., 2016; Grandin and Sareen, 2020; Bulkeley, 2023; Ehnert, 2023). This shift is accompanied by new expectations and demands on the role of CSA. In particular, there is an expectation that CSA, rather than only acting in an advisory capacity to established actors, provide bottom-up grassroots transformative impulses (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016; Ehnert et al., 2018; Suitner and Krisch, 2023). Since each of the above perspectives poses certain dilemmas yet also opportunities for CSA (Wittmayer et al., 2016), it seems beneficial to integrate both approaches. The latter, however, again leads to several tensions, which Peris and Bosch (2020: 1) refer to as a larger “paradox of planning for transformation” (see also Wolfram, 2018).

Overall, the above tensions and paradoxes make apparent that it is crucial for CSA to organize their activities in a way that enables focus, while also allowing them to diversify, and thus adapt their activities if needed. As both are difficult to achieve within a single organization, studies are increasingly shifting focus to the organizational context composed of various organizations and organizational forms, as well as the ecology that emerges from this. In this respect, research already highlights that what is happening in-between organizations, such as formal and informal networks, and intermediaries, is particularly relevant (North and Longhurst, 2013; Wolfram, 2016; Van den Heiligenberg et al., 2017; Ehnert et al., 2018; Kivimaa et al., 2019; Peris and Bosch, 2020; Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021; Suitner and Krisch, 2023). What is still lacking, however, is knowledge about ways that productively balance focus and diversity in CSA’ activities to address the above tensions over time. Therefore, studies emphasize the significance of examining not only the organizational context but also its evolution over time to better understand civil society activities in urban sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016; Grandin and Sareen, 2020).

To gain new insights, we conduct a longitudinal case study. A case study is an exploratory method of theory building (Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2018). A long-term approach helps to identify the dynamics that change the organizational context and shows how CSA deal with the described tensions and paradoxes over time. The Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) in Augsburg, Germany, provides an insightful example to examine these dynamics. It is a rather unusual or atypical case for at least two reasons (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018): first, it was initiated by CSA, unlike most other LA 21 processes that were initiated by public actors (Echebarria et al., 2018). Second, it is still active and has outlasted and evolved different governance perspectives on urban sustainability. In contrast, many other LA 21 initiatives have already been dissolved again because they were not able to adequately engage CSA and achieve the level of transformative activity necessary to solve today’s grand challenges (Auweck et al., 2003; Barrutia et al., 2015; Wittmayer et al., 2016).

In a comprehensive review of case studies on civil society in sustainability transitions, Frantzeskaki et al. (2016) show that few studies address the changing organizational context for CSA’ activities over time. However, the LA 21 in Augsburg allows us to analyze both the changing organizational context *and* the activities within this changing organizational context. In particular, we address three research questions: *How does the organizational context for civil society activities in urban sustainability transitions evolve? How does this organizational context influence CSA’ activities? And how can CSA in turn shape this organizational context?*

While our research questions are deliberately formulated in a broad way at this point, we will later derive some more concrete propositions from our theoretical framework to guide our analysis. Yet, we delimit ourselves to studying institutional dynamics. Several reasons apply for such an institutional perspective. First, the activities of CSA are expected to be mainly aimed at inducing institutional (rather than e.g., technological changes). Second, an institutional framework allows to both investigate changing CSA’ activities and the changing organizational context within a common theoretical framework. To scrutinize the change of civil society activities, we draw on the ‘institutional work approach’ (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011), which allows to describe different activities of CSA and track respective changes over time. We conceptualize the context of these activities via organizations, which express both institutional change and enable agency (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Owen-Smith and Powell, 2004). This theoretical framework allows us to derive propositions about how different configurations of organizations enable different forms of institutional work over time.

Methodologically, the single longitudinal case study, comprises 1) a quantitative document analysis over a 20-year period to identify changes in CSA’ institutional work activities and 2) a qualitative analysis of ten in-depths interviews with CSA as well as desk research, participatory observations, and informal talks to trace changes in their organizational context in this same period.

The paper is organized as follows: chapter two elaborates on the changing role of CSA in different governance approaches to urban sustainability transitions and how this affects the tensions inherent in organizing CSA’ activities in urban sustainability transitions. Chapter three presents the conceptual framework to analyze changes in CSA’ activities and their organizational context over time. Chapter four describes the case study of the LA 21 in Augsburg and the methodology. Chapter five then presents our findings and discusses the underlying qualities and dynamics of an organizational context that allows CSA to adapt their activities to changing context conditions. Chapter six formulates concluding remarks.

## 2. The changing role of civil society in the governance of urban sustainability

Drawing on current literature on urban sustainability transitions, we elaborate on how the discourse and practice of governing urban sustainability have shifted in recent years (2.1), how this shift requires changes in the role as well as activities of CSA (2.2), and how these changes are shaped by the organizational context in which CSA operate (2.3).

### 2.1. Shifting governance perspectives on urban sustainability

Since the 2000s, there has been a notable shift from traditional urban planning to more experimental governance approaches (Carroli, 2018; Bulkeley, 2023; Ehnert, 2023). Strategic planning processes aim at long-term predictability and at optimizing the performance of a system. Sustainability, understood as the ecological, social and economic optimization of existing conditions, was integrated as a normative concept into (urban) planning in the early 1990s (Greiner, 2002; De Haan et al., 2013). The governance of urban sustainability was from that time onwards shaped by the development of policies and action programs involving the public. These processes were usually anchored in different departments within the public administration (Peris and Bosch, 2020). Emblematic of such a form of governance is Local Agenda 21, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1992 (Barrutia et al., 2015). LA 21 processes, which were usually initiated by public actors (Echebarria et al., 2018), relied primarily on consultation and aimed towards consensus building among stakeholders (Wolf, 2005), as well as driving change in incremental ways (Wolfram, 2018).

Yet, in the 2000s, the view that a fundamental change in existing systems is necessary to meet the increasingly complex global challenges became more and more prevalent. With this insight, the governance of urban sustainability shifted towards a "politics of experimentation" (Evans and Karvonen, 2010; Bulkeley et al., 2014; Bulkeley, 2023; Ehnert, 2023). The corresponding social search and learning processes through experimentation are often accompanied by the formation of new coalitions and networks that exert pressure on established actors and structures (Wittmayer et al., 2016). Compared to planning approaches, these processes usually involve particularly innovative frontrunners from different societal domains (Wolfram, 2018), who address problems from a more integrated and systemic perspective (Peris and Bosch, 2020). Examples of this include specific governance approaches such as transition management (Rotmans et al., 2001; Kern and Smith, 2008; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010) or the strategic niche management approach (Kemp et al., 1998; Smith 2007) or instruments such as urban laboratories, which are intended to facilitate experimentation and learning through trial and error (Bulkeley et al., 2016).

### 2.2. Changes in the role and activities of civil society

The above shift in governance approaches presents both new opportunities and challenges for CSA, requiring a reevaluation of their role and changes in their day-to-day activities. Strategic planning is based on a rather voluntaristic and deliberation-oriented understanding of the role of CSA, ascribing them primarily an advisory function. Typical activities associated with this role (such as lobbying, advocacy, consultation, evaluation or monitoring) usually take place in close proximity to established actors and contribute to rather incremental improvements to existing systems (Wittmayer et al., 2016). While this enables CSA to get involved in the long-term planning and implementation of sustainability, it restricts their ability to operate with greater flexibility. Therefore, governance approaches, which emerged in the context of a strategic planning perspective, have often been criticized for making CSA part of the public/administrative system and thus for not putting them in a position to initiate "real" change (Wittmayer et al., 2016).

In more experimental governance approaches, governments are no longer necessarily in the driving seat of such processes. Rather, such processes allow for activities by a variety of societal actors such as companies or CSA and can even take place at a distance from established actors. In this context, several authors indeed expect CSA to take on a more proactive role and become drivers of urban transition from below (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Wendler, 2014; Feola and Nunes, 2014; Alexander and Rutherford, 2018). This goes along with the expectation that the activities of CSA now go beyond advocacy and consultation, contributing directly to the development, acceptance and implementation of more sustainable practices in society (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). More experimental, interventionist and action-oriented approaches are thus better able to harness the particular qualities of CSA in order to initiate "real" transformation. At the same time, however, these experimental approaches in distance to established actors make it difficult for CSA to spread new social practices beyond the niche level (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). To achieve this wider impact, several studies confirm that CSA need to also interact with prevailing governmental and market logics, even if this might jeopardize their opportunities to experiment outside existing structures (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). This shift in governance perspectives therefore goes along with the dilemma for CSA between being either too experimental to achieve a broader impact or too close to dominant organizations and institutional logics to have the freedom to experiment. In this way, it can be expected that CSA are also confronted with the challenge of integrating more transformative activities into existing planning structures and thus to navigate the larger "paradox of planning for transformation" (Peris and Bosch, 2020: 1).

### 2.3. Influence of the organizational context in which civil society operates

Recent studies suggest that to what extent CSA are able to navigate the above tensions, is significantly shaped by the organizational context in which they operate. In the literature this organizational context is described as comprising the organizations, networks, or even ecology of organizations that exists in an urban area (e.g., Wolfram, 2016; Van den Heiligenberg et al., 2017; Raven et al., 2019; Torrens et al., 2019; Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021; Grandin and Sareen 2020). Although respective studies do not show how the above tensions can be dissolved, they highlight a number of qualities that make organizational contexts conducive for experimentation

activities. Among others, these qualities comprise the existence of both short-term organizations, which offer actors flexibility for experimentation and innovation, and more stable organizations, which provide stability, accumulated expertise and resources (Grandin and Sareen, 2020). Long term strategies and visions are also commonly mentioned as an instrument to institutionally anchor transition activities and enable joint activities (North and Longhurst, 2013; Ehnert et al., 2018; Peris and Bosch, 2020; Suitner and Krisch, 2023). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the importance of networks and (ecologies of) intermediaries for communication, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among diverse stakeholders (North and Longhurst, 2013; Feola and Nunes, 2014; Wolfram, 2016; Van den Heiligenberg et al., 2017; Kivimaa et al., 2019; Torrens and Von Wirth, 2021).

These studies already point to the importance of the organizational context. Yet, the processes and dynamics underlying a context for civil society activities have received less attention so far. This research gap refers both to the interplay of different elements (e.g., temporary organizations, permanent organizations, networks, visions), the development of such a context over time as well as how such an organizational context affects the activities of CSA (e.g., in what way does it enable these actors to conduct more experimental and potentially transformative activities?). Understanding the development and evolution of such an organizational context is important, because it cannot be implemented ad hoc but has to develop over time (see also Feola and Nunes 2014; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). It becomes particularly relevant from an experimental governance perspective, where this organizational context much more than in previous governance approaches – forms the basis for civil society activities.

### 3. Conceptual framework to analyze changes in civil society activities and their organizational context

To analyze the changing role of CSA and their organizational context in this field of tension in more detail, we apply an institutional perspective. Institutional changes often build the outset of sustainability transitions at the urban level (e.g., Brown et al., 2013, Rohracher and Späth, 2014) and, in general, are an important basis for such value-driven processes. CSA are particularly able to contribute to a change in citizens’ more personal values and beliefs due to their proximity to and the trust they receive from local citizens (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). An institutional perspective furthermore enables to coherently describe changes in both civil society activities and their context. To analyze civil society activities, we use the institutional work approach (3.1) (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011). The institutional context is described through organizations (3.2) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

#### 3.1. Civil society actors and institutional work

Institutions are understood as (socially) shared expectations that guide actors’ behavior beyond the individual (Scott, 2014). According to Scott, they comprise regulative elements (such as laws and regulations), as well as normative and cognitive elements (such as values and interpretive schemes).

In their institutional work approach, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) assume that actors can consciously initiate change in their institutional environment. At the same time, the institutional environment regulates behavior (Thornton et al., 2012). Therewith, decisions and outcomes are a result of the interplay between individual agency and institutional context also referred to as ‘embedded agency’ (Battilana and D’Aunno, 2009).

The concept of institutional work emphasizes 1) actors and their activities, via which they attempt to achieve institutional change, 2) that institutional change often cannot be attributed to one single (heroic) actor but is the result of distributed agency, that is the

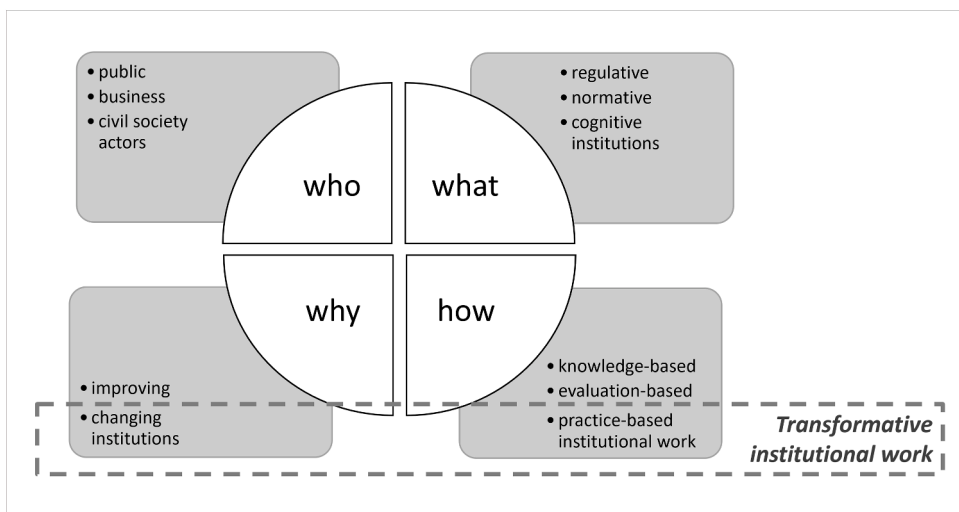


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of CSA’ activities in urban sustainability transitions (inspired by Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Frantzeskaki et al., 2016, Avelino and Wittmayer 2016). Own illustration.

(conscious or unconscious) interaction of many actors, and 3) different forms of institutional work (e.g., maintain, create or disrupt institutions) (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Since we are interested in processes of institutional change, we focus on the creation and disruption of institutions. The authors furthermore distinguish institutional work activities according to the areas/elements of institutions they target (i.e., the “what”; see Fig. 1): “political work” refers to activities that are primarily designed to define laws and rules, as well as access to material resources (e.g., by mobilizing political/regulative support or constructing new rule systems); “normative institutional work” is focused on changing belief systems (e.g., through the construction of identities, by changing normative associations or creating normative networks); “cognitive institutional work” is aimed at changing abstract categorizations, framings, and meaning systems of actors. It is thus mainly about providing new meaningful interaction patterns those actors can adhere to (e.g., by drawing on existing patterns, developing new concepts, or providing the necessary skills and knowledge).

To examine the changing activities of CSA regarding sustainability transitions, we add three further dimensions to the systematization suggested by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). First, the target group of institutional work is important to consider, as it provides relevant information about the relation of CSA to other actor groups involved in the governance of urban sustainability transitions; based on Avelino and Wittmayer’s (2016) Multi-Actor Perspective for transition studies, we differentiate into different actor groups, namely public, business, and other CSA (i.e., the “who”; see Fig. 1). Second, there are different reasons for engaging in institutional work in the context of urban sustainability transitions in the first place (i.e., the “why”; see Fig. 1): institutional work activities can either be aimed at improving existing structures and practices and thus change them incrementally. As elaborated in chapter 2, this work is typical for activities connected to planning processes and work which is conducted close to established actors. Or institutional work activities can be directed towards developing alternatives to existing structures and thus at fundamentally changing existing practices or restructuring societal systems. This institutional work is often connected with more experimental approaches in distance to established actors. We term the former “improving” and the latter “changing” institutional work.

Third, we differentiate institutional work activities in terms of “how” they seek to achieve these goals. Inspired by the potential contribution of CSA suggested by Frantzeskaki et al. (2016), we distinguish between primarily knowledge-, evaluation- and practice-based activities. While the former refers to the production and dissemination of knowledge, the second refers to an evaluation regarding the sustainability of certain products / practices and the third to the actual implementation of new practices or ideas. The latter means that CSA not only comment and contribute ideas, but via co-production and empowerment, actively engage in the development and implementation of new practices (Innes and Booher, 2010; Stauffacher et al., 2008).

In addition, based on the two categories of “why” and “how”, we define *transformative* institutional work as an overarching category. In our understanding, *transformative* institutional work is thus work via which actors try to intentionally change existing institutions (“why”) and which has a particular focus on practice-based activities (“how”) (deHaan and Rotmans 2018). Activities that fall in this category thus state a credible alternative to existing systems (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016; deHaan and Rotmans, 2018), an aspect which is seen as particularly important for transformative purposes in more recent governance approaches to urban sustainability (Peer and Stöglehner, 2013; Frantzeskaki et al., 2016).

### 3.2. An organizational context for institutional work

Similar to other authors, who have emphasized the influence of different forms of organization for the activities of actors in urban sustainability transitions (e.g., North and Longhurst, 2013; Wolfram, 2016; Raven et al., 2019), we argue that the organizational context in which CSA operate influences their institutional work activities.

Organizations are intentionally created configurations of institutional structures and practices (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). They differ from institutions but are also closely connected to them and the two mutually influence each other (Strambach and Pflitsch, 2020). On the one hand, organizations are subject to institutional pressures and must find legitimacy for their actions in their environment (Suchman, 1995; Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006). On the other hand, organizations have agency themselves and can also enable agency by providing actors with resources, rights or positions to achieve a certain effect with their actions (Suddaby, 2010; Abdelnour et al., 2017).

Organizations differ and one way to differentiate them from a neoinstitutional perspective is via institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, 2008). The concept of institutional logics assumes that the behaviour and perceptions of certain groups of actors are influenced by particular belief systems, principles and authorities, which converge to guiding principles (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). An example for such an institutional logic is a sustainability-related logic that emphasizes ecological and/or social limits to growth (Runhaar et al., 2020). This sustainability-related logic differs from a market logic that highlights aspects of economic efficiency.

Organizations are usually characterized by one or a few dominant institutional logics, which facilitates coordination within the organization (Scott, 2014). In this way, organizations serve as a “focusing device” for institutional agency (Nooteboom, 2000: 50). Organizations can contribute to focusing agency by legitimizing or delegitimizing certain practices (Möllering and Müller-Seitz, 2018). Due to their focusing function, organizations reduce uncertainty about what activities are supported and prevented and thus increase the effectiveness of (distributed) institutional work. This quality of organizations as “focusing devices” contributes to implement the dominant institutional logic(s) of an organization.

The same quality that focuses an organization results also in differences between organizations. Different organizations follow different principles, rules and goals. Institutional logics are thus one way to describe diversity between organizations. This diversity influences the collaboration of organizations in that organizations are likely to collaborate with organizations that have a similar institutional logic. Conversely, different institutional logics can hinder cooperation between organizations (Røhnbæk, 2021).

Yet, organizations can also comprise different institutional logics. Stark (2009) for example emphasised the role of diversity within organizations for increasing creativity, innovation and options for action when it comes to addressing new problems and challenges



(see also Grabher and Stark, 1997). Different institutional logics or “orders of worth” according to Stark (2009) make organizations open to follow different ideas and also accept divergent information at least as a source of inspiration.

Different organizational forms allow for more or less diversity between and within organizations. One way of distinguishing organizational forms is through their temporality. For example, a distinction is made between temporary and more permanent organizations, which ultimately create different conditions for institutional work (Strambach and Pflitsch, 2018, 2020; Grandin and Sareen, 2020). Temporary organizations bring together actors with different institutional logics outside their existing routines (Lange, 2014). This intra-organizational diversity opens up space for the development of new perspectives and facilitate sense-making processes. The latter can build a starting point for institutional work aimed at disrupting existing institutions and creating new ones. More permanent organizations on the contrary tend to reduce organization-internal diversity, while increasing diversity between organizations. Permanent organizations therefore usually pursue institutional work activities that contribute to stabilizing new practices or maintaining existing institutions (Strambach and Klement, 2012). Network-based forms of organizations are according to Strambach and Pflitsch (2020) positioned in the middle, serving primarily the pooling of resources and coordination of institutional work activities between different organizations.

Institutional work is thus shaped by the organizational context of the actors conducting it. Based on the state of the art elaborated in chapter 2, we assume that institutional work regarding urban sustainability transitions requires an organizational context that allows to focus the activities of CSA but also to adapt them to changing context conditions (in particular changes in governance approaches) over time. More precisely, we deduce the following propositions regarding essential qualities and temporal dynamics of such contexts:

P1: The organizational context is shaped by different configurations of diversity and focus. There is no optimal balance between diversity and focus, but these describe different forms of constantly adapting transformation processes.

P2: The nature of institutional work is influenced by its organizational context, with organizational diversity inducing institutional work expanding the transformation process while organizational focusing inducing institutional work consolidating the transformation process.

P3: Actors are able to change the organizational context in which they are embedded in order to adapt their institutional work to new circumstances.

#### 4. Case study and methodology

In this chapter, we first introduce the case study and motivate the case selection (4.1). In particular, we provide a detailed description of the basic organizational context of LA 21 in Augsburg (Germany) and how it provides different opportunities for CSA to conduct institutional work. Building on this, we then explain how we capture and analyze the institutional work that CSA have conducted via these different channels and the changes in the organizational context (4.2).

##### 4.1. The example of Augsburg – a civil-society-led Local Agenda 21 process

The LA 21 process in Augsburg represents what Yin (2018) refers to as an unusual case, i.e., a case that is rather distinct and allows to study a research problem from a new angle. Such a research design thus has the potential to generate theoretical insights albeit involving, by definition, only a single case (Yin 2018). Of particular importance for the case selection here was the fact, that – unlike many other LA 21 processes (Echebarria et al., 2018) – the LA 21 in Augsburg was started by CSA (Stamm, 2020). In addition, while many LA 21 failed to live up to initial expectations (Auweck et al., 2003, Barrutia et al., 2015, Wittmayer et al., 2016), the accomplishments of LA 21 in Augsburg (e.g., the establishment of a holistic sustainability vision for Augsburg) have been recognized prominently among others by the jury of the German Sustainability Award. Hence, while we are not able to analyze the impact of civil society activities in detail here and do not claim that the LA 21 in Augsburg is a best practice case, this recognition indicates that we are dealing with a comparatively effective and successful civil-society-led LA 21 process. In accordance with our conceptual framework, we posit that the organizational context established by Augsburg’s LA 21 has been pivotal in this regard. While we describe and analyze the evolution of this context in detail later, we briefly present the basic organizational structures of Augsburg’s LA 21 below in order to make our methodological approach comprehensible.

The LA 21 in Augsburg is currently organized in 31 forums (status Nov. 2023) and a sustainability advisory board in which organizations from business, science and civil society (with voting rights) and (more recently) representatives of the city council (without voting rights) are represented (see Fig. 2). As indicated by the arrow (a.), the forums can make official requests to the city council or the city administration via the sustainability advisory board. The other arrows (b.) show that activities in the LA 21 forums, can also address (in a more informal way) politicians, city administrators, the broader public, and specific urban/regional actors (e.g., NGOs, universities, firms). Moreover, forum participants (represented through the circles (c.) around the LA 21 forums) can also carry out institutional work outside of the forums.

##### 4.2. Mixed-method approach to scrutinize the sustainability transition process in Augsburg

Fig. 3 depicts our research design. While we assume that the changing discourse and practice of governing urban sustainability transitions shapes the institutional work of CSA (see arrow 1.), we do not investigate this process empirically (at least not explicitly and in much detail). We are also not able to measure the actual impact of CSA’ institutional work on the urban sustainability transition either. Instead, we aim to find out how CSA’ institutional work has changed over time (i.e., became more transformative; see arrow 2.),

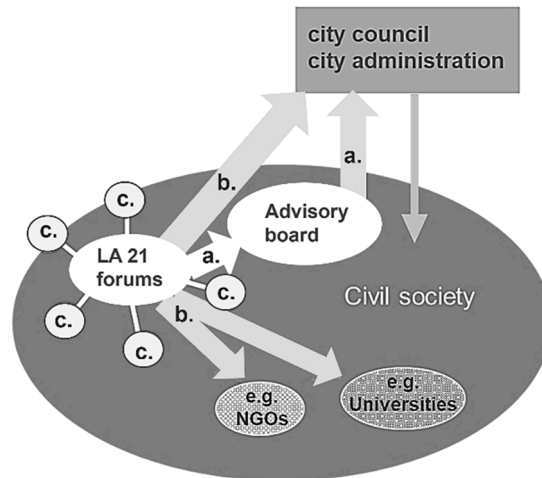


Fig. 2. Organization of Augsburg's LA 21 process. Modified after: [Stadt Augsburg 2023a](#).

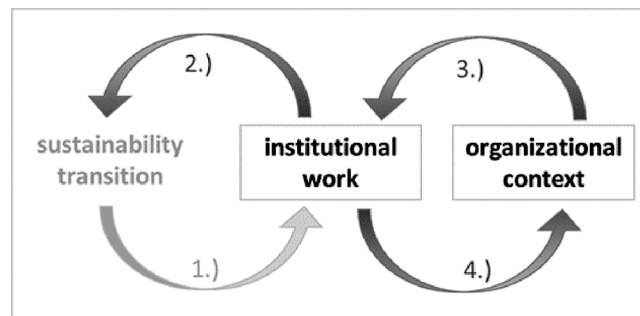


Fig. 3. Research design. Own illustration.

what changes in the organizational context have enabled these changes in CSA' activities (see arrow 3.) and how CSA themselves adapted their organizational context accordingly via their institutional work (see arrow 4.).<sup>2</sup>

For this purpose, we applied different quantitative and qualitative social science methods and triangulated different sources of data within a single longitudinal case study design ([Gerring, 2004](#); [Yin, 2018](#)). The latter allows to divide the process into different phases (i. e., “temporal bracketing”; [Langley, 1999](#): 703) and thus to work comparatively despite the single case design.

To analyze the continuous evolution of institutional work activities over time, we used two sets of documents, the protocols of the Sustainability Advisory Board and the LA 21 newspapers. The first analysis is based on 70 protocols, covering the period from 1996 until 2018 and focused on the requests that the LA 21 forums submitted to the City Council via the Sustainability Advisory Board (35 requests in total). The LA 21 newspapers have been published (usually) twice a year since 1996; initially in print format, from 2004 on digitally. The newspapers mainly report on the activities of the LA 21 forums in the form of short articles. Overall, the data base for the content analysis comprised approximately 1.500 pages of documents.

To identify different types of institutional work activities (i.e., the “what”), the categories of [Lawrence and Suddaby \(2006\)](#) have been applied. However, the authors combined this deductive strategy with an inductive approach, to refine and complement these categories. This approach is similar to that taken by other authors who have argued that the categories of institutional work need to be refined to account for the specificities of sustainability transitions (e.g., [Löhr et al., 2022](#)).

Based on our conceptual framework we also included three different target groups of institutional work (actors from the city administration, professionals and other citizens), the main aim of the institutional activity (the “why”) as well as the “how” into our analysis. For an overview of all the developed categories see [Table 1](#).

The coding was conducted in an iterative process, in which the first and second author coded the material separately and then compared their coding. In the case of divergent coding, additional desk research was conducted to make a more informed decision

<sup>2</sup> An example for this type of institutional work could be found e.g., in the category “Creation and / or modification of organizational structures” in [table 1](#).

**Table 1**

Analytical categories. The comments in italics show the authors inductive development of categories.

Category	Definition	Example(s)	
TYPES of IW ("WHAT")	<b>Primary regulative</b>		
	<b>Modification and / or creation of policies and plans</b>	Request that changes be adopted in existing bylaws, plans, or in the allocation of resources that mandate or incentivize sustainable actions. <i>[Similar to vesting]</i>	1) Request that city ensures the energy efficient construction of the Sheridan Barracks 2) Request that city uses the "Sustainable urban development criteria guide" for future projects
	<b>Creation and / or modification of organizational structures</b>	Request to adopt a change in structures and operating procedures to further the sustainability process. <i>[Similar, but broader than defining]</i>	1) Request that the city council be more involved in LA 21 through one-on-one meetings with LA 21 speakers, etc. 2) Request to appoint a cycling officer for the city of Augsburg
	<b>Primary normative</b>		
	<b>Joining a normative network</b>	Request to join a network by which an actor commits to consider, monitor, and/or evaluate sustainable goals in its decision-making processes. <i>[Similar to constructing networks]</i>	1) Request that the city joins the Climate Alliance (Alianza del Clima e.V.) 2) Request that the city officially supports the Global Marshal Plan
	<b>Taking on a role model</b>	Request to adopt a resolution aimed at making an actor a leader and/or role model in sustainable action. <i>[Similar to constructing identities]</i>	1) Request that the city uses regionally produced and GMO-free food in its own facilities 2) Request that photovoltaic cells be installed on the roofs of municipal buildings
	<b>Moral evaluation of certain actions and / or ideas</b>	Representation of an action and/or idea as socially (un)desirable (e.g., through reward or disapproval). <i>[Similar to changing normative associations but with focus on practices]</i>	1) Search for the oldest refrigerator in Augsburg and replacing it with a new one 2) Piling up old clothes on the town hall square 3) Participation in "Fridays for Future" demos
	<b>Call for sustainable action</b>	Explicit call to act sustainably (e.g., in the form of targeted campaigns). <i>[Similar to changing normative associations but with focus on practices]</i>	1) Implementation of the „Bring your own cup“ campaign 2) Implementation of a return campaign for mobile phones
	<b>Questioning practices and / or creating visions</b>	Challenging existing practices and/or imagining desirable practices in creative and participatory ways. <i>[Similar to changing normative associations]</i>	1) Implementation of the Utopian living laboratory "Wolkenkuckucksheim" 2) Inviting actors to games that encourage reflection on the current monetary system 3) Implementing the photo exhibition "A world without plastic"
	<b>Normative and / or cultural-cognitive</b>		
<b>Sale of sustainable products and / or services</b>	Stimulation of sustainable practices through the sale of sustainable products / services. <i>[Similar to changing normative associations]</i>	1) Sale of Fairtrade chocolate 2) Organizing a cargo bike rental	
<b>Exchange of information and / or viewpoints</b>	Exchange of information and / or viewpoints and perspectives to trigger normative and / or cognitive change in other people. <i>[Might contain educating, constructing identities and/or changing normative associations]</i>	1) Discussion with city councilors of different parties about new streetcar construction 2) Talking about and reflecting on money with citizens in the pedestrian zone	
<b>Identification and networking of multipliers</b>	Identification and networking of actors who are in a position to bring about the decision to act sustainably in their environment and/or pass on sustainable practices <i>[Contains both constructing networks and adopting a role model]</i>	1) Implementing sustainability breakfasts for local entrepreneurs ("Focus N") 2) Organizing a regulars' table for organic cooks	
<b>Primary cultural-cognitive</b>			
<b>Production and / or diffusion of knowledge</b>	Collecting and processing knowledge and diffusing it (verbally or in writing) from one sender to many recipients. <i>[Similar to educating, via information]</i>	1) Organizing a lecture on "Energy saving in old and new buildings" 2) Distribution of the 16-page information brochure "Paperturnaround" 3) Compilation of the Augsburg poverty report	
<b>Joint development of sustainable practices</b>	Joint development of or intensive practical engagement with sustainable practices (e.g., in the context of workshops, training courses, coachings, seminars). <i>[Similar to educating, via practices]</i>	1) Offering "Plastic-free workshops" for daycare centers and schools 2) Organizing a cargo bike self-build workshop	

(continued on next page)



Table 1 (continued)

Category		Definition	Example(s)
AIMS of IW ("WHY")	<b>Joint implementation of sustainable practices</b>	Joint implementation and integration of sustainable practices into people's daily lifes. [ <i>Similar to embedding and routinizing</i> ]	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Implementing an urban gardening project</li> <li>2) Organizing an art camp to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds</li> </ol>
	<b>Changing</b>	The goal / vision behind this activity is to bring about fundamental change in a system, i.e., to promote/expand or develop alternative technologies, infrastructures, or practices that result in the need to change other elements within a system.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Implementing a car-free day in the city of Augsburg</li> <li>2) Organizing an information session on passive houses</li> <li>3) Establishing an urban permaculture project</li> <li>4) Organizing a photo exhibition "A world without plastic"</li> </ol>
	<b>Improving</b>	The goal / vision behind this activity is to improve an existing system / make it more sustainable, i.e., to supplement or improve already established practices that do not necessarily require further adjustments in the system.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Request to improve Augsburg's bike paths</li> <li>2) Distributing a flyer on energy saving</li> <li>3) Organizing a fair-trade city rally</li> <li>4) Compiling a poverty report for Augsburg</li> </ol>
FORMS of IW ("HOW")	<b>Knowledge-based categories</b>	Umbrella category that contains primarily knowledge-based categories, i.e., "Exchange of information and / or viewpoints" and "Production and/or diffusion of knowledge"	<i>See individual categories above</i>
	<b>Evaluation-based categories</b>	Umbrella category that contains primarily evaluation- based categories, i.e., "Moral evaluation of certain actions and / or ideas", "Joining a normative network", "Taking on a role model", "Questioning practices and / or creating visions", "Call for sustainable action"	<i>See individual categories above</i>
	<b>Practice-based categories</b>	Umbrella category that contains primarily practice- based categories, i.e., "Sale of sustainable products and / or services", "Identification and networking of multipliers", "Joint development of sustainable practices", "Joint implementation of sustainable practices"	<i>See individual categories above</i>
ACTORS in IW ("WHO")	<b>Administration / Politics</b>	Actors who are addressed in their role as representatives of public institutions or who hold a political office	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Reflecting the results of the housing symposium with city representatives</li> <li>2) Request that the city officially supports the Global Marshal Plan</li> </ol>
	<b>Professionals</b>	Actors who have a heightened level of knowledge / skills / expertise in a particular subject area or / and are professionally active in this same area	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Organizing a sustainability day for the economy</li> <li>2) Offering organic coaching for school caterers in Augsburg</li> </ol>
	<b>Citizens</b>	Actors who are addressed in their role as (unorganized) citizen(s).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Talking about and reflecting on money with citizens in the pedestrian zone</li> <li>2) Distribution of "no means no" postcards in restaurants and cafés</li> </ol>

and/or the coding scheme was adapted (e.g., via merging categories, specification of definitions, establishment of general coding rules).<sup>3</sup> In this way, the number of deviating codes could be reduced significantly over time. The results of the two content analyses were analyzed quantitatively. To make trends over time visible, a three-year moving/sliding window was implemented.

To investigate changes in the institutional context, we analyzed organizational changes (see also Owen-Smith and Powell, 2004) via semi-structured interviews between 01/15/2018 and 01/29/2019. Ten interviews were conducted with IPs identified through desk research as well as snowball sampling. IPs represent forums that were established at different points in time; most often the (co-) founders have been interviewed (see Table 2). All interviews took place via telephone or video conference services (except for three interviews, which took place in person). The interview transcripts were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis (Fenzl and Mayring, 2014). Subsequently the findings have been discussed, reflected and validated with the manager of the LA 21 office (IP 10).

## 5. The evolution of the Local Agenda 21 in Augsburg

In this section, we first describe how the institutional work of CSA in Augsburg has changed over time (5.1), before we then describe changes in the organizational context of LA 21 that have happened in parallel (5.2). This is followed by synthesis of both processes in chapter 5.3.

### 5.1. Changing institutional work

Findings from the quantitative analyses show how the institutional work activities of CSA changed over a 20-year period. Changes become visible on different levels, in terms of target groups and -institutions, intentions and means of institutional work.<sup>4</sup>

#### 5.1.1. From administrative actors to citizens and professionals as target group

Fig. 4 shows the percentage of institutional work per year directed at different target groups. It makes apparent that over time a change in target groups took place: activities directed at the city administration and politics started on a high level (around 65%) but then decreased significantly. In contrast, those activities directed directly at citizens increased considerably between 1999 and 2002 and remained consistently high (highlighted in grey in Fig. 4). Activities directed at professionals also tend to increase. It is noticeable that since 2011 more activities were directed at professionals than at actors from the city administration or politicians (highlighted in grey in Fig. 4). This stronger focus on citizens and professionals is also reflected in the interviews. One example is the “parking day” which used to be organized as a central rally on City Hall Square to address politicians and is now organized in a decentralized manner, with a stronger focus on regaining parking areas as community space and intention of triggering a change in awareness among citizens.

#### 5.1.2. From regulative to normative and cognitive institutional work

Fig. 5 shows the percentage of regulative and cultural-cognitive-normative institutional work per year. It makes visible that from the beginning, normative and cultural-cognitive forms of institutional work represented most of the forums’ activities. There was also a relatively high proportion of regulatory activities in the early years of LA 21 (approximately 25 %). The regulatory institutional work represents primarily official requests from LA 21 forums to the City Council via the Sustainability Advisory Board. Examples are a request by the mobility forum to install a cycling officer in the city’s building department and a request by the energy forum to implement a passive house standard. However, these activities decreased significantly between 1999 and 2001 (highlighted in grey in Fig. 5) and remained at a relatively low level until they almost completely disappeared in 2013.

#### 5.1.3. From knowledge-centered to more practice-oriented institutional work

Fig. 6 shows the percentage of different types of institutional work per year. It makes apparent that evaluation-based activities represented between 10 and 20 % of the activities that fall into the normative and cultural-cognitive categories throughout the entire time span. Knowledge-based activities also seem to have played an important role throughout and they clearly predominated until the year 2005. In contrast, practice-oriented activities increased between the years 2000 and 2005, and then again after 2010 (highlighted in grey in Fig. 6). At the end of our data series, they took up almost 40 % of the total activities in the normative and cultural-cognitive categories. The interviews support our quantitative findings of a shift towards more practice-oriented activities. Many of the interview partners from the forums that were founded after 2009 explained that they increasingly try to change every day-practices of citizens.

#### 5.1.4. From improving towards changing institutional work

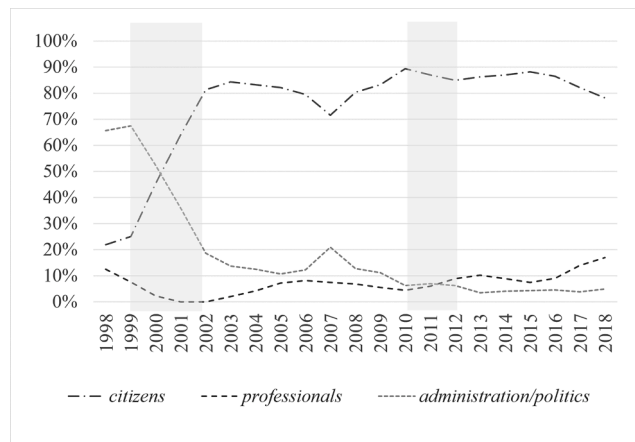
Fig. 7 shows the percentage of improving and changing institutional work per year. Improving activities predominated during the entire period. However, those activities aimed at a more fundamental change increased significantly, especially in the last years (from 2012), to almost 40 %. Smaller peaks in “changing” institutional work occurred in 2001 and 2007/2008 (highlighted in grey in Fig. 7), mainly focused on renewable energy initiatives such as funding brochures, solar technology guidance, and solar plant tours in response to the 2000 Renewable Energies Act. The 2007/2008 peak resulted mainly from efforts by the “LechTaler” regional currency forum to reform the financial system, which was, however, disbanded shortly after. After 2011 (highlighted in grey in Fig. 7), there is a much greater variety of changing institutional work by different forums, spanning post-growth discussions, activities around vegan nutrition,

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B for more detailed coding rules and definitions of categories.

<sup>4</sup> Appendix A gives an overview of the total number of coded activities in the different categories.

**Table 2**  
Interview partners and their involvement in LA 21 forums.

#	Forum(s) in which the interview partner has been involved in	Forum's year of foundation	Role and motivation of the IP in the LA21 forum and related activities that the IP is involved in
1	Energy („Energie“)	1996	The IP is actively involved in the energy forum and has regularly participated in its meetings since its foundation. In parallel, the IP was/is active in various local associations and societies. At times, the IP has also participated in the transport forum.
	Transport („Verkehr“)	1996	
2	Energy („Energie“)	1996	The IP has been a member of the energy forum since its early years. The IP has been participating in the forum mainly in the IP's role as an energy consultant in the climate protection department of the city of Augsburg, but also due to a private interest in the topic.
3	Transport („Verkehr“)	1996	The IP has been organizing the transport forum for several years. The IP is also one of the official spokespersons for the LA 21 in Augsburg.
4	Energy (“Energie”)	1996	The IP is the founder of the living space Schwabencenter and co-founder of the co-creation forum. In addition, the IP has been a regular participant in the energy forum for several years, partly because the IP is interested in this topic as an architect.
	Living space Schwabencenter („Lebensraum Schwabencenter“)	2015	
	Co-creation (“Mitgestaltung”)	2017	
5	Urban Gardening („Urbane Gärten“)	2011	The IP is the founder of the forum on urban gardening and since a few years has also been professionally active in the field of environmental education.
6	Corporate responsibility („Unternehmerische Verantwortung“)	2012	The IP is a member of the forum on corporate responsibility. The IP has been participating in this forum for several years, mainly in the IP's role as a regional manager at the regional economic development agency but also as an interested citizen.
7	Transition Town (“Transition Town”)	2013	The IP is a member of the transition town forum and a co-founder of the standing conference of cultural professionals. Working as a freelance community manager, media artist and campaigner, many of the IP's projects are closely linked to those of the forums. In addition, the IP has been an official speaker of the LA 21 in Augsburg for several years.
	Standing Conference of Cultural Professionals (“Ständige Konferenz der Kulturschaffenden“)	2017	
8	Flowing Money („Fließendes Geld“)	2014	The IP is the founder and moderator of the flowing money forum to which the IP contributes own experience and expertise from the banking sector.
9	Forum Plastic-free („Forum Plastikfrei - Wege in ein nachhaltiges und ressourcenschonendes Leben“)	2017	The IP is the founder and moderator of the plastic-free forum. In the meantime, the IP also deals with the topic professionally, as a journalist, author and speaker.
10	Manager of the LA 21 office	—	The IP has been manager of the LA 21 office since 2005. Before that the IP has been a civic speaker of the LA 21, while working for the World Solidarity Organization.



**Fig. 4.** Percentage of institutional work per year directed at different target groups (n = 713).

sociocracy, cargo bikes, and urban permaculture gardens.

Hence, we can identify three phases in the evolution of the institutional work activities of the LA 21 in Augsburg: Before the early 2000s, institutional work focused on normative, cultural-cognitive, and to a large amount also regulatory elements of institutions targeting primarily actors from the city administration and politics. From the early 2000s to around 2011, the emphasis shifted to normative and cultural-cognitive forms of institutional work aimed mostly at citizens. Since 2011, institutional work involved much more diverse, and to a larger degree also practice-based activities, which are more often aimed at fundamentally changing existing

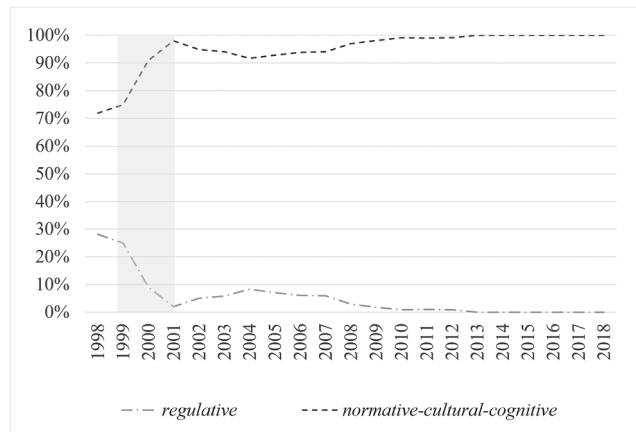


Fig. 5. Percentage of regulative and cultural-cognitive-normative institutional work per year ( $n = 713$ ).

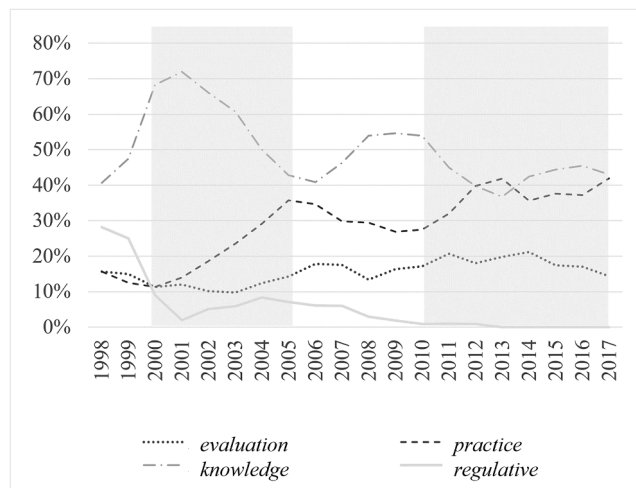


Fig. 6. Percentage of different types of institutional work per year ( $n = 713$ ).

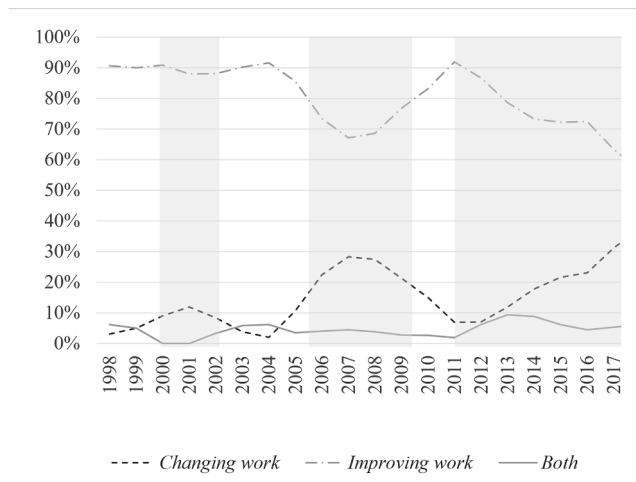


Fig. 7. Percentage of improving and changing institutional work per year ( $n = 713$ ).

conditions and which are directed at both citizens and professionals.

## 5.2. Changes in the organizational context

Similarly, but slightly different to the three phases identified in the CSA' institutional work activities, we identified three phases of changes in the organizational context, on which we will elaborate in the following.

### 5.2.1. Formation phase (1996–2000)

The first phase is characterized by the establishment of a basic organizational context. It starts in 1996 with the initiation of several network meetings of different civil society groups by the Werkstatt Solidarische Welt e.V., which had the aim to develop a LA 21 for Augsburg that could then be proposed to the city council. As a result, in 1996 the city council officially adopted the LA 21 and decided to install a position in the city's environmental department. The latter was from now on referred to as "LA 21 office", although it was only a half time position staffed out of the city's personnel reserve. Nonetheless, the office quickly became an important contact point for the CSA network, which had by then also elected their own civic spokespersons.

Under a conservative government, the initial political climate wasn't exactly conducive to these activities. The CSA' ability to establish these basic organizational structures within the city administration nevertheless, was attributed to support from individual conservative political actors and the strategic use of certain windows of opportunity, exemplified by Augsburg's recognition as an environmental competence region in 1996.<sup>5</sup>

In parallel to these developments, a series of LA 21 forums emerged within civil society, which allowed the development of new more sustainable practices in specific thematic areas, such as energy, transport, or sustainable urban development (see area highlighted in grey between 1996 and 1999 in Fig. 8).

In line with our data on institutional work from the previous chapter, the main aim of the forums established in this first phase was on "improving" institutional work and on activities directed primarily at administrative/political actors. In 1997, at the request of the civic LA 21 organization, an Environmental Advisory Board was established (which was later renamed into Sustainability Advisory Board). The advisory board enabled the forums to formally submit motions to the city council (see also Fig. 2) and, as our quantitative data shows, was initially also used intensively by the forums for this purpose.

As the IP from the forums founded in this early phase explained, their goal was to bring actors from the public field and from civil society together to exchange information and learn about the other's perspective. A representative of the city administration and regular participant of the energy forum described his role in the forum as follows: "Yes, as part of my intermediary role between the forum and the city I provide information as far as possible". (IP 2) The forums, that have been founded in this first phase, thus reflected the classic approach of LA 21, which was about bringing together representatives from public administration with representatives from civil society to jointly make a specific sector more sustainable.

However, from the forums' point of view, the outcome of this form of institutional work has not always been satisfying. An indication is, e.g., that the energy forum in 1998 threatened to discontinue its work due to the lack of response to the forum's requests that had been submitted to the advisory board.

### 5.2.2. Consolidation phase (2000–2009)

In the second phase, discernible from our qualitative data, the priority shifted away from the initial thematic expansion through the foundation of new forums (see non-highlighted area between 2000 and 2008 in Fig. 7). Instead, the second phase is characterized by the consolidation and further elaboration of the organizational context. This change in focus can at least partly be explained by the fact that a socio-democratic mayor took office from 2002 to 2008.

One of these activities was the development and implementation of the Future Guidelines. The guidelines set out a long-term vision for Augsburg in three sustainability dimensions (social, ecological, economic). They also contained more specific guidelines in each dimension and corresponding targets and indicators. In the beginning of 2002, the LA 21 office initiated a series of round tables in which a sustainable action program (the basis for the subsequent guidelines) was developed together with the LA 21 forums and the broader public. The program was adopted by the city council in 2004.

Another key organizational change happened in 2005, when the municipal LA 21 position was taken over by the former LA 21 civil society spokesperson and was two years later converted into a full-time position. Through this change, more direct avenues of collaboration emerged between CSA and public actors. The interview partners highlighted that by bringing these different actors together and by keeping them informed about each other's work, the LA 21 office started to play an intermediary role, becoming an "important informant and door-opener" (IP 7) for the forums' activities. A precondition for this was according to the interviews that a person with a background in the civil society branch of the LA 21 was appointed to manage the city's LA 21 office. As the manager of the LA 21 office also explains, "the civil society roots of the staff enable a permanent bridging between the civic and the public field" (IP 10). To avoid LA 21 becoming too mainstream, nevertheless, the civil society spokespersons remained in place, expressing, and positioning themselves independently of the LA 21 office.

As is visible in our data on institutional work, regulatory institutional work dropped to a very low level at the beginning of this period and remained there until it eventually completely disappeared. The current manager of the LA 21 office explained this with a

<sup>5</sup> See Strambach and Pflitsch (2018) for further details on the latter.



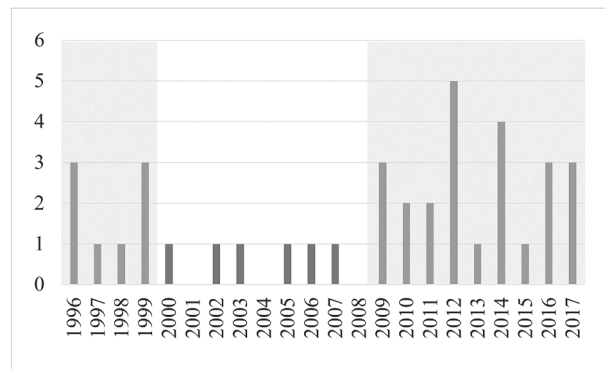


Fig. 8. Number of LA 21 forums established per year. Based on data from: [Stadt Augsburg 2023b](#).

shift in focus: “for the forums, the guidelines also offered an opportunity to push through things [now], although on a somewhat more general level.” (IP 10) In the interviews with the forum’s representatives, it was also mentioned that the applications to the city council by the Environmental Advisory Board (which made up a large part of this regulatory institutional work) were at some point no longer seen as necessary because there were now more direct avenues of exchange between CSA and public actors through the LA 21 office.

### 5.2.3. Transformation phase (since 2009)

The third phase started in 2009, i.e., slightly earlier than the increase in transformative institutional work, with the foundation of a high number of new forums. In addition to this diversification process, this phase is characterized by increasing consolidation and focusing activities (see area highlighted in grey between 2009 and 2017 in Fig. 8).

The second “wave” of new forums that were founded in this third phase differed in terms of the forums’ thematic focus, target groups and goals from those of the forums founded in the first two phases. The forums that have been founded after 2009 usually focused on very specific problems or goals, such as the initiation of urban gardening projects, making Augsburg plastic-free, fostering vegan nutrition, changing values towards money, or exploring sociocracy as a new organization method that, however, often transcend classic sectoral and/or departmental boundaries. From the beginning, these forums had the vision of initiating a fundamental change in a particular system and thus relied on more interdisciplinary and holistic approach than the earlier forums. The founder of the forum “flowing money” e.g., explained: “the previous economic system originated in Augsburg, through the Fuggers,<sup>6</sup> and it is a fascinating thought that Augsburg is the nucleus of something to further develop the monetary system as we know it today” (IP 8). The main target group of these newer forums were citizens and to a lesser extend professionals.

Differences between the forums that have been founded in this third phase and the earlier forums also become apparent when looking at their institutional work activities described in the previous chapter. Our analyses show that in particular the forums founded from 2009 onwards engage in transformative institutional work: 13 % of activities of forums founded before 2009 are aimed at a more fundamental change compared to 28 % of the activities of the more recently founded forums. Moreover, only 23 % of institutional work activities of the older forums are practice-oriented compared to 39 % of the newer forums.

In the interviews, it became clear that new topics and/or approaches were initially brought into the LA 21 process from the outside by the respective founders of the new forums. Although most of the founders of the new forums had dealt with the respective topic for a longer period beforehand and had contacts to other actors with similar interests/goals, the founding of the LA 21 forum was usually the beginning of more intensive institutional work activities. In this context, it becomes apparent that the newer forums often cooperated with actors from an alternative and/or artistic milieu, such as Greenpeace, Transition Town (TT) or the Utopia Toolbox (an international art project).

With these new forums, the boundaries between LA 21 forums and organizations from a more alternative milieu have increasingly become blurred. One example are the overlaps with TT Augsburg, which is itself a LA 21 forum. At the same time, there are forums such as the forum “Living space Schwabencenter” that are organizationally anchored in both LA 21 and TT. Due to the openness/non-binding nature of the forums, it also happened that e.g., representatives of Attac or Fridays for Future (FFF) participated in the LA 21 forums on a selective basis. At the same time, many individual participants of the newer forums (e.g., “Forum Plastic-free”) have been active in other organizations as well (e.g., Solidarity Farming). The importance of these blurred boundaries was pointed out several times in the interviews. For example, the founder of the forum “Living space Schwabencenter” (IP 4) explained: „I honestly believe that this is very fertile ground, [...] this very alternative, very different [milieu] and then again, the connection to the city”. These blurred organizational boundaries enabled the CSA organized in LA 21 to take up ideas and impulses from an alternative milieu and to use their, by then already established position in the city administration, to bring these closer to the mainstream (e.g., through diverse capacity building activities that the LA 21 office is organizing for actors in the public administration). Although social movements like Attac or FFF are frequently taking a critical stance towards LA 21, they also acknowledge the important mediator role of the LA 21 in

<sup>6</sup> Swabian merchant dynasty.

Augsburg and use the forums for their purposes accordingly (Stoffels et al., 2021; Marcon, 2021). This relationship also became apparent when the Climate Camp Augsburg recently managed to open a "room for discussion" about the city's climate protection activities through its protests in front of the city hall. When the communication between the activists and public actors reached its limits, the energy forum, one of the oldest forums in the LA 21, played an important mediating role, by drawing on its long-accumulated knowledge, as well as the trustful relations it built up to public actors over the years. In addition, during this phase, direct links to city politics were strengthened, particularly by individuals associated with the LA 21, who assumed political roles within Augsburg's Green Party.

In addition to these developments on the part of the forums, this third phase is also characterized by a long-term consolidation of the work of the city's LA 21 office. In 2014, the LA 21 position in the city administration was finally separated from the Environmental Office and transferred to an independent staff unit within the Department for Environment, Sustainability, and Integration, thus institutionalizing the cross-cutting work of the LA 21 office within the city administration eventually. In 2014/2015, it was decided to base the Future Guidelines on a strong interpretation of sustainability and to supplement the previously three dimensions by a fourth, cultural dimension (reflecting the increasing focus of the new forums on this dimension). As understood by LA 21 Augsburg, the cultural dimension of sustainability provides the broader framework for the transformation to sustainability. This cultural dimension was thus not only an addition to the other dimensions, instead it enabled a profound re-interpretation of existing goals in the other three dimensions (Leipprand, 2021).

In 2015, the city council decided to consider the Future Guidelines as the basis for Augsburg's sustainable development, its urban development concept, as well as all other municipal plans (Stadt Augsburg, 2015). Furthermore, every city council decision must be based on a sustainability assessment ("Nachhaltigkeitseinschätzung") based on the Future Guidelines.

### 5.3. Different temporal configurations of institutional work and its organizational context

To synthesize the evolution of the institutional work activities of the LA 21 in Augsburg as well as their organizational context, we can identify three phases in the evolution of the institutional work activities of the LA 21 in Augsburg as well as their organizational context: The *first* phase before the early 2000s is characterized by normative and cultural-cognitive as well as a significant amount of regulative institutional work. In addition, a large part of this institutional work is addressed to actors in the city administration and politics. These institutional work activities were facilitated by newly founded organizations, namely the LA 21 office and a first "wave" of forums. The *second* phase from the early 2000s until approximately 2011 is dominated by normative and cultural-cognitive forms of institutional work, which are addressed mostly at citizens. In parallel, institutional work towards the development of an organizational context also took place; yet less through the foundation of new forums, but primarily through "thickening" the institutional and organizational environment via 1) the development of the Future Guidelines and 2) the consolidation of the LA 21 office. Overall, these two phases are reflecting a rather classic LA 21 approach, which is, however, unlike most other LA 21 initiatives (Echebarria et al., 2018), anchored in civil society. The *third* phase of institutional work, starting in 2011, is characterized by a substantial amount of practice-based and changing institutional work activities, which are directed at citizens and increasingly also professionals. Changes in the organizational context, which seem to have facilitated this change in institutional work, started slightly earlier, in 2009. Since this year, an increasing diversity of new topics and approaches was integrated into the existing organizational context of the LA 21 via a second "wave" of newly founded forums. At the same time, „focusing activities“ continued through the expansion of the position of the LA office and the extension of the Future Guidelines; the latter, indicating a fundamental change in the cognitive-cultural foundations of the LA 21. Hence, this third phase reflects a more transformative approach in fostering urban sustainability transitions that now involves an even broader range of CSA, also including actors from a more alternative milieu.

## 6. Qualities and dynamics of an organizational context for civil societies' institutional work

In this paper, we wanted to shift the focus from individual civil society organizations towards the broader organizational context in which these actors are operating. We were in particular interested in how such an organizational context evolves over time, in what ways this changing context affects or enables certain activities of CSA and how these actors themselves can shape this organizational context. In line with these explorative questions, we elaborated three propositions (see end of Chapter 3.2). We are mindful of the limitations of a single case study. Whilst our empirical findings informed the formulation of these (theoretical) propositions, to acquire general validity, would require application and testing by future studies in other cities.

In the following, we will reflect these propositions on the insights gained and discuss how the findings contribute to a further understanding of the organizational context for both the governance of urban sustainability transitions in general and civil society activities in particular (and thus our broader research questions).

### 6.1. Different configurations of diversity and focus shaping the organizational context (P1)

The first proposition refers to the relation between diversity and focus of the organizational context over time. The interplay between exploring, focusing, and bridging diversity seems to be essential for the adaptability and effectiveness of CSA' activities in urban sustainability transitions. We (roughly) operationalized diversity via different institutional logics. One contribution of our study is that diversity depends not only on creating something new, but also on maintaining the old. Maintaining old forms can be an important capability and a source of adaptability. An example could be seen e.g., in the recent discussions around Augsburg's CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets. Here, the older forums, whose activities are more incremental and linked closely to the city administration,

collaborated with newer forums, which adopted more experimental approaches. This fruitful connection between seemingly “outdated” and new forms of institutional work is exemplified by Grabher and Stark’s (1997) description of the role of different organizational forms in post-transformation economies. In this case, the reason for a successful transformation process was not a quick replacement of socialist by capitalist forms of organization, but the existence of a variety of different institutional logics, embedded in older and younger organizations. The interplay between these different logics helped organizations to come up with solutions to the (difficult-to-predict) problems that arose during the transformation process. Applying these findings to urban sustainability transitions, it can be expected that practices, experiences, and competencies from the past often still play an important role in contemporary civil society activities (see also Moss, 2020). This also implies that the generation of diversity is a lengthy process and that diversity cannot be created ad hoc.

Another insight regarding diversity of organizations and institutional logics was that “focusing devices” (Nooteboom, 2000: 50) are important. An example was the establishment of the LA 21 office within the city administration, providing orientation to common goals, creating accountability for actors, and thereby increasing their effectiveness. This focusing is reinforced by the Future Guidelines, which were not only the result of the work of the forums, but have also given them orientation: They helped CSA to bundle, structure, and focus their activities. Again, the longitudinal case study shows that focusing is a process that could only reach its full potential through the development and integration of complementary elements, i.e., “focusing devices” over time.

Of central relevance seem to be networks and relations between these more formal organizations. These relations allow to exploit the above-mentioned diversity through “blurring” or what Grabher and Ibert (2011: 177) call “perforation” of boundaries. In the case of the LA 21 in Augsburg, this blurring of boundaries happened both through individuals who were active in several forums, as well as through links to other city and regional organizations. This blurring of boundaries took place between all kinds of forums, also between older and newer forms. This blurring of boundaries in this phase led both to a stronger coherence between organizations and combinations between different organizations and their logics as a source for new ideas and approaches.

Our study found different organizational configurations in the three phases. The first phase created diversity, the second phase was shaped by focussing and consolidation, whereas diversity increased again in the third phase. A similar cyclical development was also found in other studies. Feola and Nunes (2014), based on their quantitative comparative study of TT worldwide, assume that successful civil society organizations traverse a cyclical development, in which phases of consolidation and variety creation alternate. In a similar way, Grandin and Sareen (2020) found that many initiatives follow a sequence going from catalyzing, via revamping to routinizing transitions. Our study adds to this literature by showing that these developments are to a lesser extent cyclical (implying an alternation of phases with similar qualities) than evolutionary. This difference becomes apparent when comparing the first and the third phase of our case, which both were shaped by diversity creation. Yet, the underlying dynamics fundamentally differ. In the first phase it was mainly a diversity of organizations. The diversity creation in the third phase strongly coincided with both blurring of boundaries, leading to manifold connections between organizations, and focusing activities. Thus, our study shows indeed different phases, but less a cyclical alteration than an evolutionary process shaped by increased complexity, meaning that each phase is characterized by distinct dynamics.

6.2. Influence of the organizational context on the nature of institutional work (P 2)

The second proposition suggests that the organizational context affects the kind of institutional work that is done. In this regard, three organizational forms that differ in their temporality stand out, which, as indicated by the arrows in Fig. 9, facilitate three key processes that affect CSA’ institutional work: 1) Permanent organizations have a focusing effect on diversity, which occurs primarily through the creation and consolidation of organizations and institutional structures. 2) Temporary organizations enable the

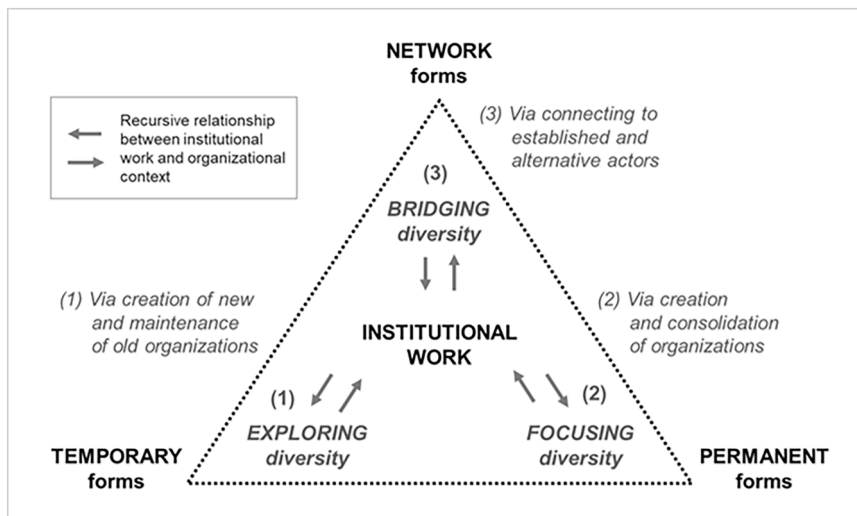


Fig. 9. An organizational context for CSA’ institutional work in urban sustainability transitions. Own illustration.

exploration of diversity, which happens mainly through the creation of new organizations but also the maintenance of old ones. 3) Networks make it possible to bridge diversity by creating links to established and alternative actors; in this way, network forms of organization enable to exploit the diversity created via temporary organizations. We found that different configurations of these organizations affect institutional work in different ways in the three phases identified in our material.

The first phase was shaped by many new temporary organizations. Temporary organizations, such as the LA 21 forums, are characterized by a fluid composition of participants. In addition, this temporary and fluid nature facilitates the formation and dissolution of new forums. By bringing together different actors outside their existing routines, they open space for the development of new perspectives, and facilitate processes of sense-making; thus, providing a starting point for institutional work aimed at disrupting existing institutions and creating new ones (Strambach and Pflitsch, 2018). Thus, these new organizational forms started respective institutional work processes.

Permanent organizations, such as the LA 21 office, are equipped with financial and human resources. These organizations shaped the phase of consolidation. In terms of institutional work, there were already developments in the direction of transformative institutional work in the consolidation phase, e.g., around 2001 and 2008. However, these forms of transformative institutional work were often isolated and quickly disappeared again. This organizational context allowed a continuity of institutional work, but to a lesser extent institutional work that had a more transformative approach.

It was only with the establishment of new forums with new characteristics in 2009 that an organizational context emerged that enabled transformative institutional work on a broader level in various thematic areas from 2011 onward. This organizational context was shaped by both new temporary organizations (forums) and the formation of connections and networks between them. This fluid structure also allowed them to connect with organizations from a more alternative milieu (such as FFF, Attac, TT, Utopia Toolbox, or solidarity farming initiatives). More precisely, the blurred boundaries allow for two things: First a bridging of diversity, as they enable the recombination of different institutional work activities. Second, these blurred boundaries allow ideas to travel between different milieus or layers of the city, in this way, making it possible for actors to also pick up ideas and impulses from an alternative milieu to bring them into the mainstream. This integration of a broader and more alternative milieu and the effect of this increased diversity on transition processes is already described by Torrens et al. (2019). Our study additionally emphasizes that the extent to which different milieus are integrated, depends on the organizational context. Especially in the third phase, a combination of increased diversity via new forums and by bridging diversity via establishing many relations between organizations, provided the organizational background for the integration of new actors and the shift towards transformative institutional work. Hence, it was not the individual organizations, but rather the complexity that has emerged over time at the level of the organizational context or the *ecology* of organizations, which enabled CSA to engage in transformative institutional work.

### 6.3. Actors shaping the organizational context in which they are embedded (P 3)

The third proposition refers to the ability of actors to shape their organizational environment. This capacity became apparent in all phases and is therefore also indicated by the arrows (from center to corners) in Fig. 9.

Several studies already mentioned the role of knowledge brokers and intermediaries for civil society organizations to navigate between different challenges (Suitner and Krisch, 2023) or between different governance approaches of planning and experimentation (Peris and Bosch, 2020). Our study made the shift from single actors and their relations towards an ecology of actors and relations. It showed how actors by changing organizations also change this ecology. Changing this ecology has important implications for CSA. In studies like that of Suitner and Krisch (2023), CSA have to find the measures to navigate challenges. Our study points out, that this “navigating” not only refers to single organizations, but also to an organizational context and ecology.

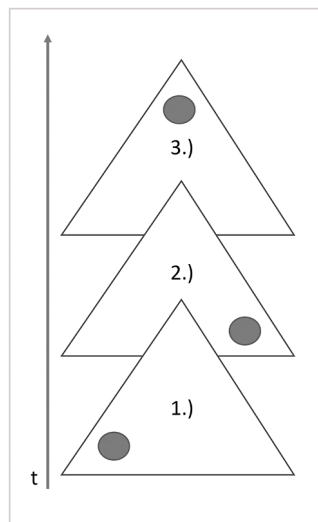


Fig. 10. Different configurations of processes in different phases. Own illustration.

Our temporal perspective also showed that the change in the organizational context was based on institutional work that had its foundation in the "old" context. This utilization of "old" competencies highlights the path plasticity (Strambach, 2010, [Strambach and Halkier, 2013](#)) in which actors use an existing institutional environment to initiate gradual changes that, nevertheless, might have a more fundamental effect on the path over time. One illustrative example is the expansion of the Future Guidelines to include a cultural sustainability dimension. The latter was created by drawing on existing resources and competencies from a more alternative milieu. Although it seems like a gradual change at first, it provides an important legitimation for more transformative institutional work and thus has the potential to lead to more fundamental changes in the long run. This example thus shows how actors used the plasticity of their existing institutional and organizational environment to gradually increase its complexity over time.

What also became apparent was that in all phases the change in the organizational context precedes a change in institutional work. This became obvious especially between the second and the third phase. Overall, these different insights show that CSA' institutional work not simply adapted to changed governance approaches. Instead, actors had to change their organizational context first in order to be able to then change the mode of their institutional work.

Overall, it can therefore be stated that the conditions and tensions CSA faced in each phase differed. CSA therefore needed to find different solutions and initiate different processes in order to navigate the specific tensions in each phase. Hence, as shown in [Fig. 10](#), there is no ideal-typical configuration of the three processes that we identified, but different processes have been more or less important in each phase.

## 7. Conclusion

Organization of civil society activities is key to transcend its limitations as distributed, short-term interventions and become effective in the long run. Yet, the organization of CSA underlies several tensions, i.e., between diverse and focused organizations and between keeping an organization stable or adaptive. Additionally, regarding sustainability transitions, CSA face the larger paradox of "planning for transformation" ([Peris and Bosch, 2020: 1](#)), which refers to the challenge of trying to create synergies and combine elements from planning and transition as well as mutually compensate for their deficits to make an impact ([Wolfram, 2018](#)).

Using the example of the LA 21 in Augsburg, we investigated how CSA navigated these tensions and paradoxes by investigating the organizational context in which civil society activities took place. More precisely, we investigated how institutional work changed from what we call improving towards transformative institutional work over time. To accomplish this change, CSA had to alter their organizational context. As a result, the organizational context of the LA 21 in Augsburg transformed from one that supports activities aiming for planned and incremental change towards one that additionally facilitates more experimental and transformative activities.

In particular, our study provides three contributions. The first contribution is to shed light on the ecology of various organizational elements that is required to create such adaptability. We elaborated on three elements to describe this ecology: a) the diversity, especially generated by the forums as temporary organizations that facilitated the integration of new topics and formed connections to other CSA; b) permanent organizations like the LA21 office or the Future Guidelines that serve as "focusing devices"; c) "blurring boundaries" between these organizations, mostly via networks of individual actors, to bridge and thus utilize this diversity.

Secondly, our study elucidates the pivotal dynamics underlying the evolution of such an organizational context. The necessity to change the organizational context became apparent, as CSA started to conduct more transformative institutional work around the year 2001. Yet, only later, the organizational context provided the necessary conditions for transformative institutional work. Several dynamics regarding the evolution of this organizational context became apparent here: a) diversity increased by both creating new and maintaining old organizations; b) diversity increased via a long-term and bottom-up process of path plasticity, whereas actors used established resources to change a path; c) also the complexity of the context increased, as the more diverse organizational forms became increasingly connected. It is important to mention that the complexity of the organizational context, shaped by both diverse and focused organizational forms as well as their manifold interconnections, allowed actors to mobilize the resources for transformative institutional work.

Thirdly, our study offers valuable insights into the governance of civil society activities in urban sustainability transitions. First of all, our findings point towards limitations of top-down governance approaches. The complex organizational context and the processes that led to its formation can only to a limited extent be steered in a top-down fashion. Furthermore, our study shows that the spatio-temporal development leads to specific characteristics of such processes, and thus no "one-size-fits-all" solution is possible ([Tödting and Trippel, 2005: 1203](#)). Yet, our findings show also avenues for supporting such processes. Our case makes apparent that existing structures and path dependencies do not necessarily impede CSA to engage in more transformative work; rather, they may offer new avenues and stimulate creative processes. In particular, our framework of focusing, diversity, and bridging (see [Fig. 9](#)) provides a tool for actors to reflect on the needs and the potential for further developments and to develop respective context-specific policies.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Gesa Pflitsch:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nadja Hendriks:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Lars Coenen:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Verena Radinger-Peer:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to



influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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### Appendix

#### Appendix A. Total number of activities in different categories

Category (classification according to “where” / “in which area”)	Number of activities
Regulative activities	19
Normative-cultural-cognitive activities	694
<i>Not evaluable</i>	58
<b>Total number of institutional work activities</b>	<b>713</b>
Category (sub-classification according to “where” / “in which area”)	Number of activities
Modification or creation of policies and plans	11
Creation or modification of organizational structures	8
Joining a normative network	6
Taking on a role model	16
Moral evaluation of certain actions and / or ideas	47
Call for sustainable action	9
Questioning practices and / or creating visions	44
Sale of sustainable products and / or services	33
Exchange of information and / or viewpoints	39
Identification and networking of multipliers	22
Production and / or diffusion of knowledge	299
Joint development of sustainable practices	62
Joint implementation of sustainable practices	117
<i>Not evaluable</i>	58
<b>Total number of institutional work activities</b>	<b>713</b>
Category (classification according to “what”)	Number of activities
Changing work	146
Improving work	528
Both	39
<i>Not evaluable</i>	58
<b>Total number of institutional work activities</b>	<b>713</b>
Category (classification according to target group)	Number of activities
Citizens	565
Professionals	65
Administrative staff and politicians	83
<i>Not evaluable</i>	58
<b>Total number of institutional work activities</b>	<b>713</b>
Category (forum foundation date)	Number of activities
Activities (before 2009)	359
Activities (from 2009 onward)	354
<i>Not evaluable</i>	58
<b>Total number of institutional work activities</b>	<b>713</b>

## Appendix B. Coding rules and additional categories

**General coding rules:**

- One unit of inquiry corresponds to one "institutional work" activity.
- A project (e.g., talent day, cycling event) can include several activities (e.g., lecture, workshop, exhibition).
- If an activity falls into more than one category, the one that is most prominent is chosen, or if it is a sequence of different activities (e.g., If a cognitive change is to be achieved in a policymaker, which may then lead to the policymaker supporting a regulatory change), the first step in this possible sequence is chosen.
- If an activity is repeated (and is explicitly reported), it is captured again. Generally, only activities that are reported in journals are recorded.
- The regular meetings of the forums (e.g., Events in the Schwabencenter or regulars' tables of the forum plastic-free Augsburg) or even other internal forum activities are not recorded as "institutional work" activity, because they are considered as internal preparation of "institutional work".
- The activities of the Citizens foundation and the Solidary World Workshop, from which LA 21 emerged, are considered as preparation of "institutional work" and are therefore not recorded.
- Networking activities with other actors (outside the region) are not recorded. Likewise, activities that take place outside the region and have no relation to Augsburg (e.g., UnaVision events in Kosovo).
- Joint activities of several forums are assigned to one forum, if possible; the other forums are recorded as cooperation partners.
- If forums do something together with other actors (in the region), the forum is recorded as organizer and the other actor as cooperation partner (see e.g., utopian living lab).
- Lecture series are counted as one activity if they are explicitly communicated as such, as forums then value it as a cohesive activity themselves.
- Festivals, open days, etc. are not recorded as an "institutional work" activity.
- Activities about which there is insufficient information are recorded as non-evaluable activity.
- Activities in which forums have a (one-sided) function of providing social services (such as tutoring for disadvantaged students, awarding scholarships) are not included in the evaluation as they are not regarded as "institutional work". This applies above all to the activities of the Augsburg Civic Foundation, which is active as an LA 21 forum but, unlike all the other forums, is a foundation and thus has a different financing structure.

**Operationalization forms of "institutional work" (see also Lawrence and Suddaby 2006):***Regulatory - changing rules, laws, incentive systems, sanctions*

- usually, these elements are more formalized and compliance is monitored by external parties
- are enforced by legal coercion
- influence guilt / innocence

*Normative - change of values and norms*

- these elements define which goals and behaviors are appropriate and morally acceptable
- Social pressure as primary means of enforcement
- influence shame / honor

*Cultural-cognitive - change in basic assumptions about social reality (beliefs, interpretive schemes, modes of selection, symbols (such as language, concepts, basic metaphors, culturally embedded practices)*

- these elements define what is considered reasonable / logical in a given situation; what methods and approaches are chosen; what is considered a problem, how it is "framed" and solved
- Imitation / alignment as the primary enforcement mechanism
- Influence certainty / uncertainty

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