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Paving the Path for Citizen Participation in Infrastructure Projects

As Germany is facing enormous infrastructural challenges, citizens want to have a say and know what will be build and why. If Germany's infrastructure-renewal efforts are to succeed, politicians and public administration need to find new ways to get citizens fully involved in decision-making processes. To improve participation in practice, there must be a major push toward professionalization, as projects planned without consideration for or input from citizens will fail.

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A lack of citizens' participation can spell gridlock

As Germany pursues the Energiewende – the common term for its ambitious shift away from nuclear energy and towards renewable sources and higher efficiency – it also faces a backlog in terms of modernizing bridges, streets and railways. Under

these conditions, the country will face enormous infrastructural challenges in coming years. Since 50 percent of the electricity Germans use is supposed to come from renewable energy sources by 2030, over 4,000 kilometers of new high-voltage power lines must be set up to make that possible.

“Plans call for 4,687 km of new power lines. Only 400 km have been finished.”

In 2015, roughly 11 billion Euro is slated to be invested on planned new roads, railways and inland waterways (a total of 195 projects). Additionally, the country's 16 federal states have proposed a total of 2,147 transportation projects, all to be completed by 2025.

In the fall of 2007, prolonged and heated demonstrations against the massive railway and urban development project known as “Stuttgart 21” erupted in the southwestern German city of Stuttgart. Since then, such protests have become ever more frequent. Whether inspired by the construction of new wind farms, airports, electricity pylons or autobahns, local protests have frequently been sizeable, confirming the picture that hardly anyone appreciates a high-voltage power line in their immediate environment. Citizens are also getting better and better at organizing themselves, as well as more confident about standing up for their own interests. What's more, social media have assisted in their mobilizing and networking efforts.

Sources

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) (2013): Mehr Transparenz und Bürgerbeteiligung. Prozessschritte und Empfehlungen am Beispiel von Fernstraßen, Industrieanlagen und Kraftwerken. Gütersloh

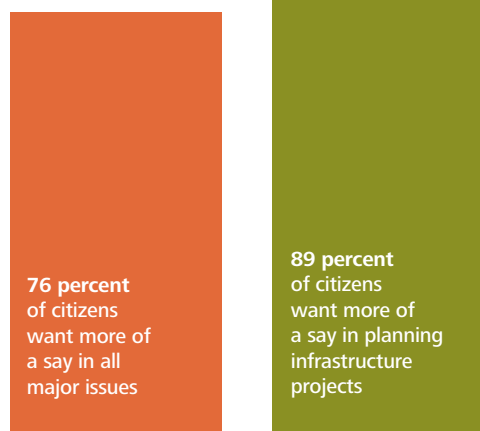
Monitoring Report 2014 of the Federal Network Agency: http://www.bundesnetzagentur.de/cln_1411/EN/Areas/Energy/Companies/CollectionSpecificData_Monitoring/MonitoringBenchmarkReport2014/Monitoring_Benchmark_Report_2014_node.html

Ambitious infrastructure-renewal plans cannot be implemented against the public's will. Citizens want to have a voice both in debating and deciding on new planning projects, and so neglecting their voices and concerns may entail delay or failure. For example, in the state of Baden-Württemberg, only seven wind turbines could be connected to the power grid in 2014, even though plans demand that the total reach 1,200 by the year 2020.

Indeed, citizens' rising demands for more information, more transparency, and genuine codetermination have to be met for infrastructure renewal to succeed. In the future, citizens must get involved at an even earlier point in debates about whether a particular infrastructure project should move forward, and they must also have a say in a more targeted way regarding where and how concrete projects will be undertaken.

Failing to reach consensus with citizens on infrastructure projects will result in gridlock. And if this happens, it won't just be the Energiewende that fails. Indeed,

CITIZENS WANT A GREATER SAY IN DECISION-MAKING



Sources: Bertelsmann Stiftung/State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg (eds.) (2014): Partizipation im Wandel. Gütersloh // Representative survey conducted by TNW Emnid on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Sept. 4, 2012

failure to boost the capacity of Germany's infrastructure could have a severe impact on economic growth and prosperity. The following six recommendations show how this can be avoided, and sketch out an improved system of disseminating information to citizens and enabling their participation in infrastructure-related decision-making:

1) "Don't wait until the excavators are already rolling ..."

Citizen participation comes too late if the excavation pit has already been dug. If citizens exercise their formal participation rights and, say, file an objection during a plan's approval procedure, the project is already essentially a done deal, after what have often been decades of planning. However, developers who get citizens involved in planning initiatives at an early stage

can familiarize themselves with their suggestions and concerns, as well as taking these into account during the planning stage. This course of action also results in fewer public objections and legal disputes.

Participation must start early, be conducted in a continuous and transparent manner, and be tailored to each particular planning phase. The planning of major infrastructure projects is highly complex. It goes through several planning phases, and is prescribed by numerous legal regulations and authorities. The latitude in terms of action and decision-making offered in each phase must be transparently divulged and fully exploited in citizens' interest. Anyone who wants to let others participate needs options and wiggle room. But anyone who "only" wants to secure approval for a project should only talk in terms of providing citizens with information, rather than giving the impression of actively involving them and raising expectations without cause.

Furthermore, political decision-makers cannot use legally required administrative procedures as a substitute for broader citizen participation. This especially holds true when it comes to making fundamental decisions related to projects of super-regional importance which have stirred controversy among the broader public, or which have already sparked fierce conflicts. In such cases, politicians must acknowledge their responsibilities, and enter actively into direct dialogue with citizens.

In 2013, the government of the northeastern German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern opted to let citizens decide whether planning should proceed on a bypass in Waren an der Müritz, a town of c. 21,000 inhabitants, about 130 kilometers northwest of Berlin. Following a process of informing citizens



Video only available
in German

About Ortwin Renn

Ortwin Renn, born 1951, is a professor for environmental sociology and technology assessment at the University of Stuttgart's Institute of Social Sciences as well as director of the non-profit research institute DIALOGIK. Among other things, his work focuses on the theory and practice of citizens' participation in public projects. EINWURF spoke with him about citizens' participation in infrastructure projects.



about the project and engaging in dialogue with them, which took place in the first half of 2013, 57 percent of the town's residents cast ballots on September 22, and 59.7 percent of these were opposed to building the bypass. Furthermore, 93 percent of the residents were satisfied that they were allowed to decide on this matter. Polls show that the citizens based their decisions not only on how the road would affect their individual and immediate environment, but also on a sound evaluation of the opposing arguments.

(2) Make information-sharing and transparency mandatory

Transparency, as well as easy and fair access to information, are the foundations of all participation. This applies especially to infrastructure projects. Indeed, such projects are prone to spark conflicts. Public administration officials and project managers who don't disclose what they know are less credible, and a lack of information fuels distrust among citizens. The impression quickly arises that public authorities have something to hide, are intentionally withholding information, or are even deliberately manipulating it. Given these facts, the legal requirements on information-sharing which are currently in place are no longer sufficient. The Internet Age has made it necessary to adapt and constantly update the ways in which we publish and disclose information. Simply putting a plan out on display in City Hall, or publishing a hearing announcement in the official gazette, are no longer appropriate to the times. For this reason, one should take advantage of all the possibilities offered by modern ICT systems to publicize and disseminate material. For instance, noise maps and computer simulations showing where high-voltage power lines or autobahns will run are appealing forms of presentation which reach many citizens when their attention is drawn to them via multiple communication channels.

A comprehensive, well-balanced, fact-based and easy-to-understand presentation of information should be made mandatory. Citizens must be able to comprehend several issues at all times – why the project is necessary; who will make what decisions, as well as when and how – and just how binding these decisions are. Likewise, it boosts credibility when things aren't just reported from the perspective of the public administration. The fact is that basic questions have already been answered for the administration, but this is far from being the case for citizens. For this reason, citizens' different points of view and preferences should be made public. In general, politicians and the public administration have a clear duty to provide information on their own initiative, instead of waiting for citizens to start asking questions.

Lawmakers must set binding obligations for transparency and information-sharing across all administrative levels and throughout all planning phases, as well as ensuring that all citizens have easy access to all relevant information.

(3) Expand participation beyond those affected directly

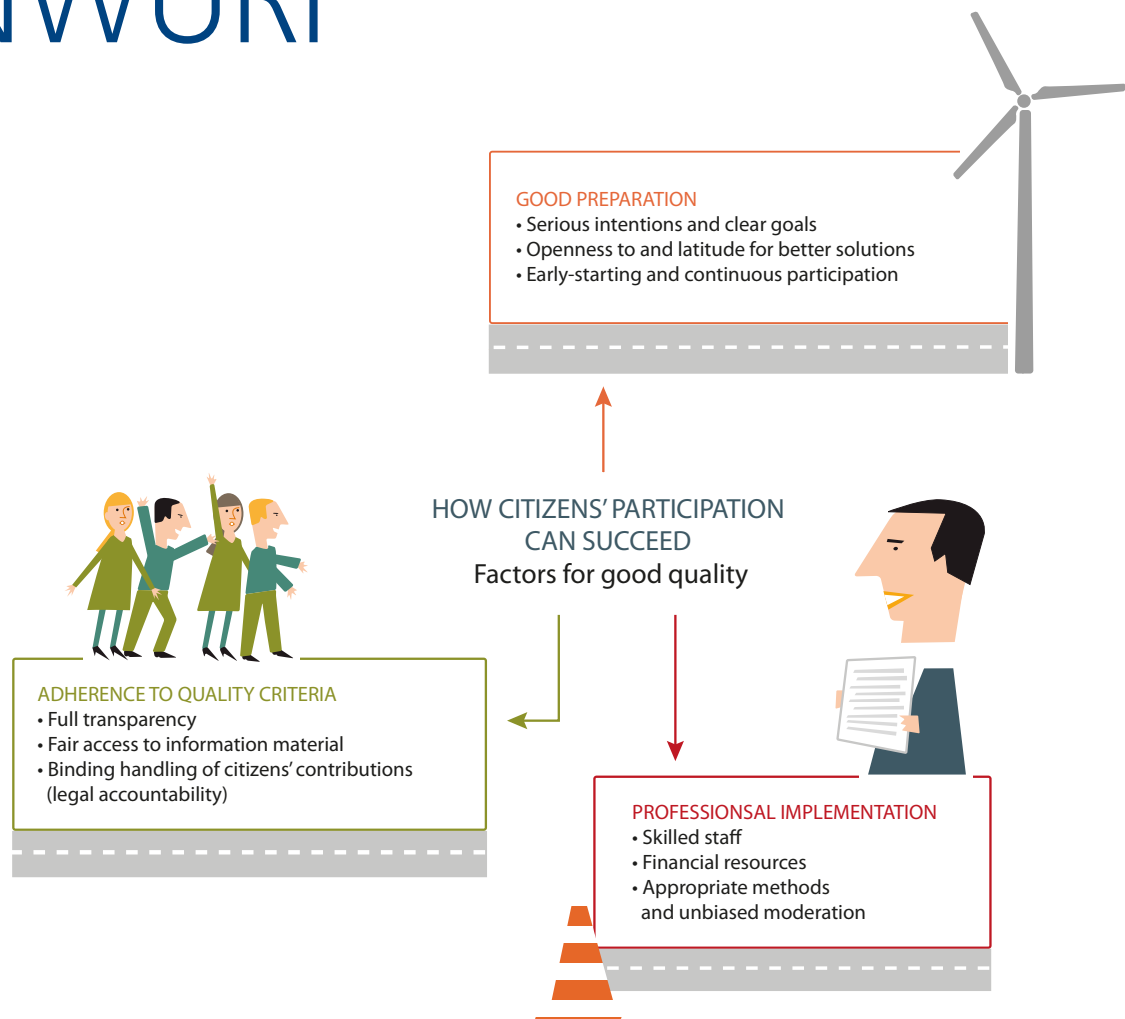
Citizen participation which only encompasses those who are directly affected simply doesn't go far enough. The reason for this is that a blocking ("not-in-my-backyard") mentality will dominate when the only people to act are those who are most affected. Indeed, this runs the risk of creating a situation in which the narrow interests of loud individual groups prevail, and in which the broader public does not accept the results of a protest that exclusively involved those who were directly affected. To counter this, there is another option: In addition to organized stakeholder groups and citizens' initiatives, a participation process can also involve citizens selected at random. This allows for a cross-section of the populace to be represented, which injects a variety of different interests and perspectives into the dialogue.

Having participation from a randomly selected group of citizens recently led to very positive experiences with citizen participation in the following projects: an integrated energy and climate-protection plan in the state of Baden-Württemberg, the building of a bypass in Waren an der Müritz (as mentioned above), and the conversion of barracks in Feldafing am Starnberger See, a town of some 4,000 inhabitants in southern Bavaria.

(4) Set legally binding minimum quality standards

Numerous evaluations show that citizen participation only contributes to the legitimacy of decisions and raises citizens' level of satisfaction with democracy when it is conducted professionally. This also means that poorly conducted citizen participation is more harmful than helpful.

While planning a new participatory process, initiators should keep in mind the expectations of those participating at the local level, the goals of participation, and the specific conditions. There can never be a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, there are minimum standards to which every participation process should adhere. Scholars have put a lot of effort into identifying the (following) factors needed to make citizen participation a success: Firstly, a genuine desire for citizens to participate must be evident. Likewise, there must be a willingness to receive and consider criticism, and an openness to making changes in plans. There must be latitude in terms of design, as well as resources for mobilizing the citizenry, and



the skills needed for the professional implementation of appropriate methods. Citizens must know how politicians and the public administration will handle their contributions, and subsequently receive feedback from political decision-makers. When it comes to conflict-prone projects, in order to make sure that discussions are focused on facts rather than emotions, it is imperative to have unbiased professional moderators and independent experts at events and workshops.

The uproar surrounding the Stuttgart 21 project resulted in a host of guidelines, handbooks and manuals on good citizen participation. Nevertheless, we still have a long way to go before we have bridged the gap between theory and practice; there is still a major difference between knowing better and doing better. For this reason, we need binding regulations for quality.

(5) Establish legal accountability for responding to citizens' recommendations

Citizens don't just want to participate in discussions. Instead, they want to see changes in how they are involved – and they notice very quickly when their participation has merely been for show, and has had no impact. If citizens are asked about their preferences, only to see their input ignored without any

explanation, they get frustrated. Matters get particularly difficult when a drawn-out, costly and time-consuming participatory process has actually been used, only to see nobody considering its results thereafter. In these cases, citizens rightly feel as if they haven't been taken seriously.

This is why it is so important for initiators of citizen participation processes to explain in advance how they intend to document citizens' opinions and the results of these participation processes, as well as taking them into consideration in subsequent planning. The introduction of legal accountability should ensure that public authorities and project managers disclose how citizens' opinions and suggestions will be handled when moving forward within a period of time determined by the specific project. Part of this also involves providing justifications whenever proposals will not be given further consideration.

(6) Secure the resources and skills needed for successful citizen participation

These days, it's no longer enough to plan infrastructure projects that are perfect in both legal and technical terms. To satisfy the need for citizens' participation, politicians and public administration must willingly acknowledge that information-sharing, communication and citizen participation are now indispensable elements in the planning of such projects.

Citizen participation performed well doesn't come without a price tag: If processes for informing citizens, engaging in dialogue with them and having them participate are to be professionally designed, public authorities and those organizing building projects must employ additional staff and financial resources – however, such measures frequently pay off during the course of the process. In fact, one of the biggest financial risks which project managers confront is delays to major projects resulting from public protests. Involving citizens' participation at an early point can allow their criticism to be taken into account, and lead to better solutions. This, in turn, not only shortens planning times, but frequently also reduces the number of legal challenges to the project. Thus, when it comes to government-funded projects, public funds should be allocated to supporting information-sharing, dialogue and participation, just as they are allocated to legally required specialist planning and expert reports.

Still, the best quality criteria are useless if you don't have the skills needed for implementation, and not all tasks can be "outsourced." In addition to familiarity with various methods of participation, the most important skills public administration should develop or acquire include communication skills related to handling conflicts, talking to citizens in a way that they can understand, seeing things from others' point of view, and dealing with the unexpected.

Further reading:

Bertelsmann Stiftung (ed.) (2014): Informieren, diskutieren und entscheiden. Was wir von der Bürgerbeteiligung Waren lernen können. Gütersloh

State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg (ed.) (2014): Leitfaden für eine neue Planungskultur. Stuttgart

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The Austrian Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management (ed.) (2011): Standards der Öffentlichkeitsbeteiligung. Vienna

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From option to obligation

Citizens' participation must be made mandatory, and formal planning processes need to be adapted to accommodate citizens' desires for democratic participation. Indeed, granting all citizens more participation rights and introducing reliable regulations aimed at ensuring more transparency could fundamentally alter the role that citizens play: Instead of protesting, and obstructing projects, their participation could become more constructive and geared towards finding solutions.

In these circumstances, one might ask whether we must wait patiently until politicians have passed legally binding regulations. The answer is: no. The fact is that current conditions already offer some latitude for improving the culture of communication and participation. If those in charge of planning projects do not begin to professionalize citizens' participation, the already well-organized "protest citizens" (as they are known in Germany) will continue to professionalize themselves with great dedication and passion. And, as a result, the Energiewende and other infrastructure projects will continue to face delays – or even fail to be realized at all.

If Germany is to succeed in its efforts to upgrade and renew its infrastructure, all those involved in the planning of infrastructure projects must transform existing knowledge about political participation into good practice. Moreover, actors in civil society must become more open to new participation processes, making their participation in the wrangling over better infrastructure solutions less confrontational and more collaborative.

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