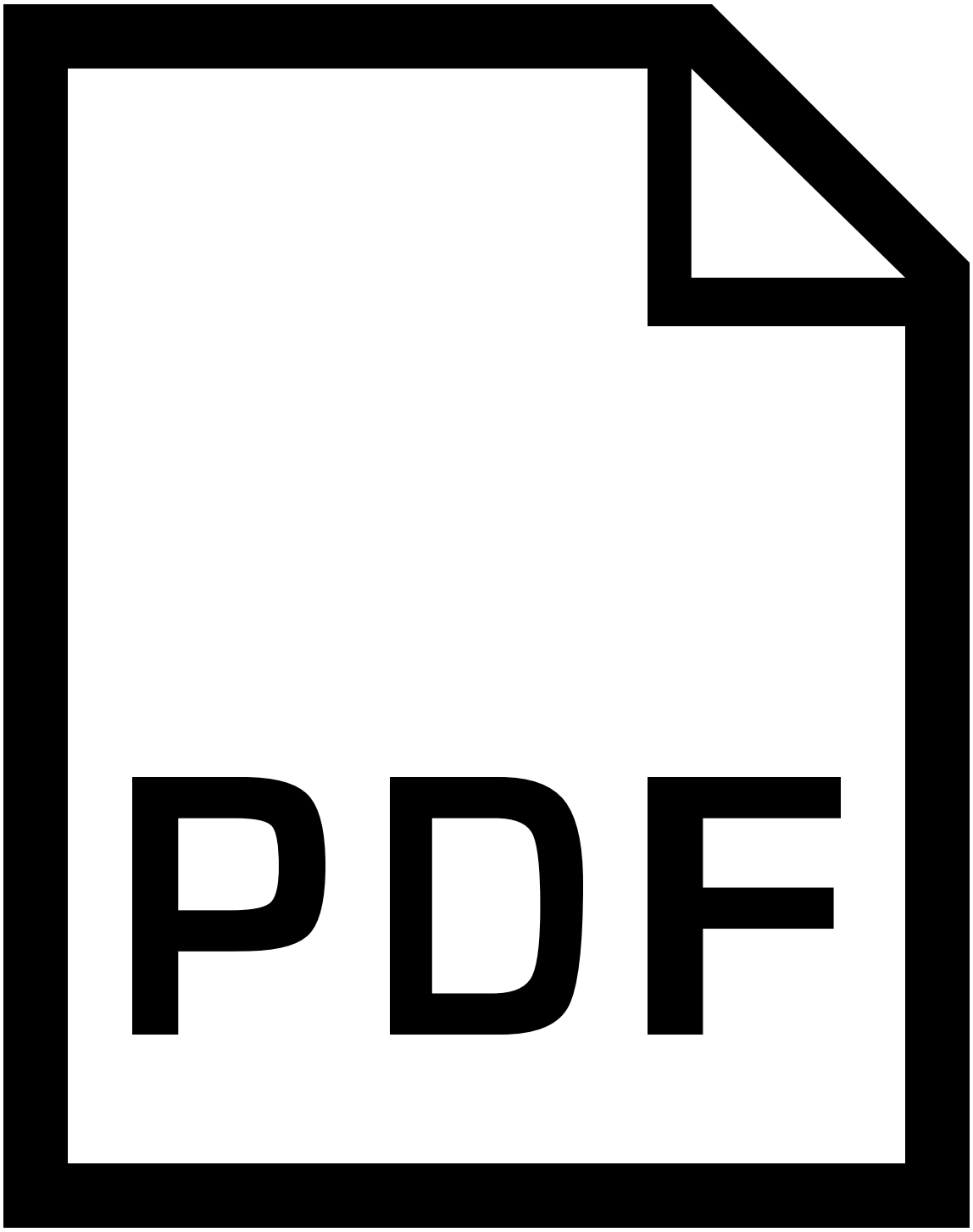
News Item, 01/04/2011, Gütersloh: Reinhard Mohn Prize Awarded for First Time

City of Recife, Brazil, is top example of citizen participation



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The Brazilian city of Recife (population 1.7 million) is the initial recipient of the €150,000 Reinhard Mohn Prize, which is being awarded for the first time in 2011. The city is being recognized for its exemplary approach to citizen participation, which uses participatory budgeting processes to give the public a say in how local funds are distributed. Each year, more than 100,000 adults and young people use the participatory system to decide on issues relating to education and municipal development. The prize will be officially awarded on June 16, 2011, in Gütersloh, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in attendance.

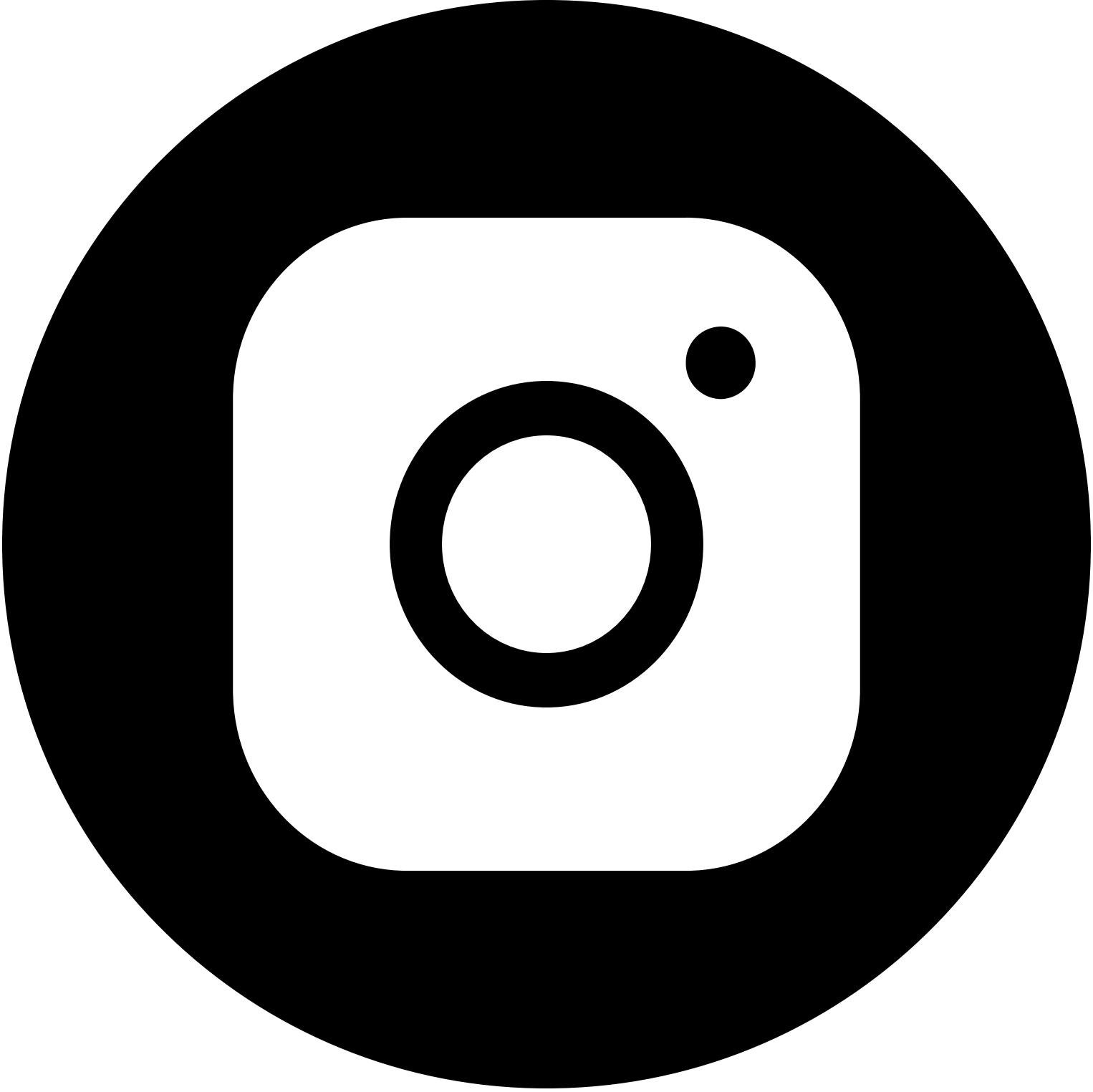
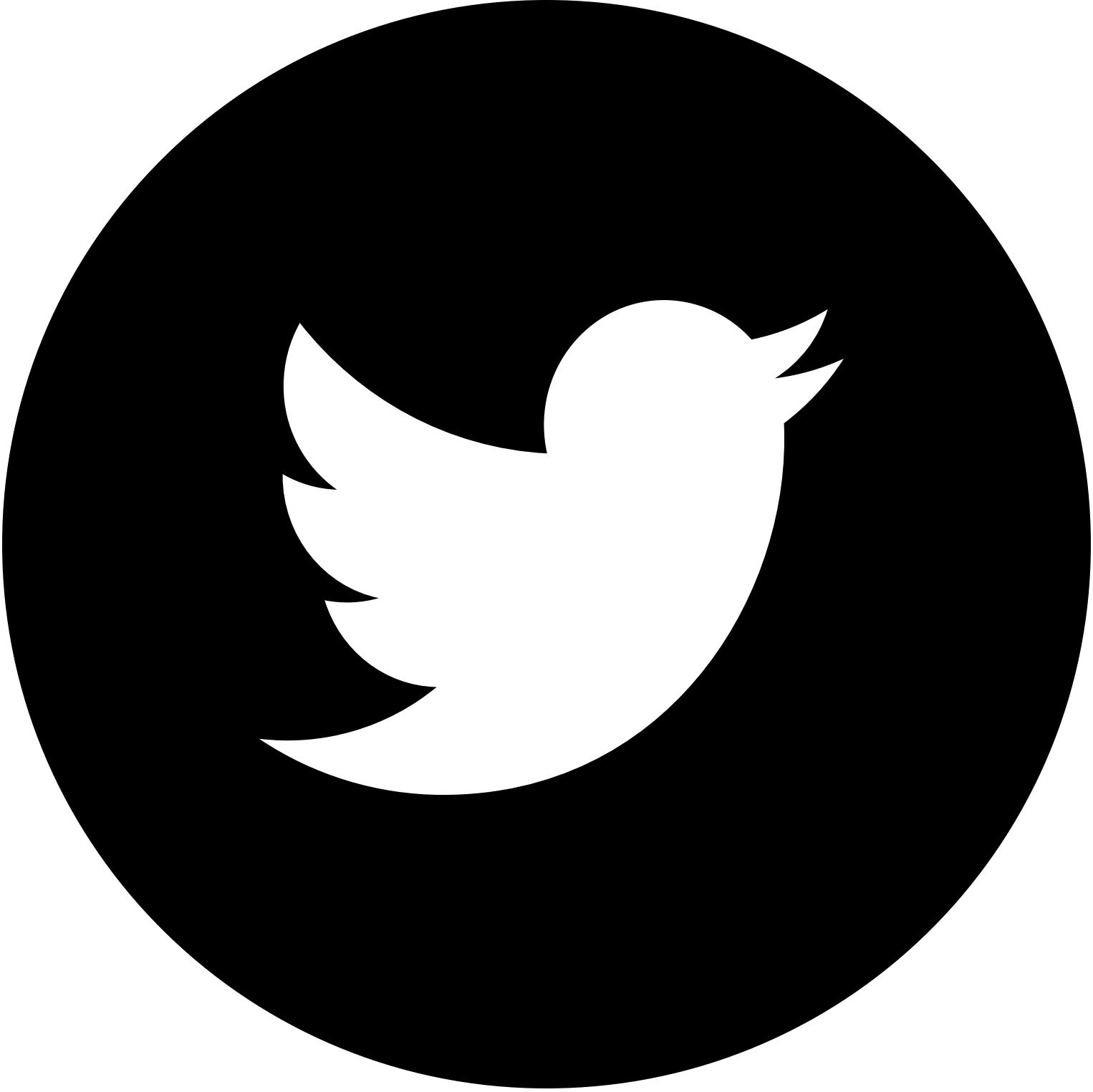
To choose this year's winner, some 11,600 members of the German public, selected to reflect the makeup of the general population, were asked to vote online for one of seven finalists, who had been selected from an initial list of 123 programs and projects. Each of the original 123 candidates was nominated from around the globe as an outstanding example of deliberative democracy.

Recife's residents now have more than 10 years of experience getting involved through forums and online voting tools, which they can use to suggest improvements and assign priorities in 15 different policymaking areas. As part of the participatory approach, 2,700 elected delegates monitor the related processes, making it possible for residents to share responsibility with city authorities for implementation of the chosen programs.

Residents have decided, for example, to commit significantly larger amounts of funding to poorer sections of the city in order to improve conditions there. Large numbers of young people, moreover, get involved to set budgets for their own schools. Since participatory budgeting was introduced in 2001, some 5,000 projects have been initiated by the public, financed by more than €220 million in public funds.

The Recife model varies significantly from many of the participatory budgeting systems used in Germany. Residents in Recife can decide directly on how a given share of the public budget will be spent, since the city council generally accepts

and implements all suggestions made by residents. In addition, the specially elected delegates ensure an ongoing exchange between members of the public and municipal authorities, as well as the successful execution of the chosen programs. By focusing on the needs of disadvantaged residents and providing unimpeded access to public administrators, the city has been successful in integrating underrepresented groups in policymaking processes.

“With its participatory system, the city of Recife shows how policymakers and the public can come together to collaborate more closely,” said Dr. Gunter Thielen, chairman and CEO of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, in announcing the winner of the prize. “The system complements the city’s representative democracy by allowing citizens to become an immediate part of the decision-making process, in conjunction with city administrators. It’s a very good example of how the public can get involved in government, an idea often advocated by Reinhard Mohn.”

Successor to the Carl Bertelsmann Prize, the Reinhard Mohn Prize is named for the business leader and philanthropist who died in October 2009 and is meant to commemorate his life’s work. The prize is being awarded for the first time in 2011 on the topic of “Vitalizing democracy through participation.”