

Dr. Gunter Thielen

**Speech given at the award ceremony for the 2011 Reinhard Mohn Prize
Thursday, June 16, 2011**

Dear Chancellor Merkel, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Over the past decades Germany's representative democracy has proven to be both stable and successful. Despite all of the criticisms we might have, we Germans are basically satisfied and in agreement with our political structures and the level of personal freedom we enjoy.

Calls for marginalizing minorities or limiting basic rights find little sympathy in German society. For a country with such a varied history, this is, I would say, a positive, hopeful sign. Yet every society is subject to change, since the basic framework for our lives is constantly in flux. This naturally impacts our democratic system and its political decision-making processes.

We can, in fact, no longer compare the early years of the Federal Republic or its original political situation to life in the country today. Just think, for example, of the role women now play in society or the growing number of personal choices people have in shaping their lives.

Something else that has changed in past decades is the influence that ordinary citizens are having. To my mind it has grown substantially. In an age of daily opinion polls, what the general public thinks is now of considerable importance.

Interestingly enough, it's obvious that people increasingly want to become involved in the processes used for identifying public policy options and for selecting the final choice. That shows the increased desire for self-determination that people now have and is also a clear signal that they want to play a more active role in the Germany's democratic system. This willingness shows that the country's citizens want to take responsibility for themselves, and for society as a whole.

This is an outstanding opportunity for making our communal life even more vibrant and democratic. After all, greater levels of citizen engagement and social participation hardly conflict with the concept of representative democracy. All of these elements must work together and complement each other in order to enlarge and strengthen German democracy.

As the outcomes from our project work show: Proactive citizens are a considerable plus for policymakers and government institutions – when their efforts are seen and accepted. Working together with the public, it truly is possible to reach decisions that are broad-based and sustainable.

Yet ordinary citizens not only want to become more involved, they also want new methods for doing so. The traditional forms of organized political engagement have lost their appeal and significance. More and more, people have the feeling that politicians and political parties are not given them enough opportunity to express themselves and are not representing them adequately. The result is often a growing indifference to policymakers and conventional political organizations.

Yet there are few indications that, as is often maintained, people have grown weary of politics or democracy in general. People are not turning away from politics, but want to become an active part of it. That explains, for example, why there have been over 6,000 public referenda at the state and local level in Germany over the past 20 years.

People get involved when their everyday lives are affected. They approach issues seriously and constructively, developing strategies and solutions that are often creative and unconventional.

The founder of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Reinhard Mohn, was always impressed how people in the United States take it for granted that they are the ones who should shape life in their communities. During his time as a prisoner of war there and during many later trips to the country, he observed how things were done and tried to find methods of applying the attitudes he encountered to Germany. American citizens were not just self-assured in their actions, he found, they were also society's common link and driving force.

I am therefore particularly glad that we are awarding this first Reinhard Mohn Prize on the topic of citizen participation. Through the prize, we want to keep his memory – as a business leader, philanthropist and citizen – alive. We want to ensure that his attitudes, ideas and visions remain vibrant. This includes the idea of looking beyond Germany for solutions and learning from best practices developed by others around the globe.

In order to award the 2011 Reinhard Mohn Prize for “Vitalizing democracy through participation,” the Bertelsmann Stiftung carried out a global search for government institutions that have proven effective in including the public in political decision-making processes. The seven finalists from North and South America and Australia show that political participation can be a win-win situation for both sides – policymakers and the public.

Above all, the finalists' initiatives clearly show that political participation:

- Increases the public's willingness to accept policymaking decisions
- Leads people to take on more responsibility and to identify more with society
- Improves the quality of public policy over the long term
- Significantly closes the gap between policymakers and the public

The winner of the first Reinhard Mohn Prize is the city of Recife, Brazil. The winning program focuses on participatory budgeting procedures that give the city's residents extensive opportunities to get involved in setting spending priorities. Every year, for example, more than 100,000 adults and young people play an active role in urban and school development efforts, something that has been true in Recife for more than ten years.

To make this possible, the city organizes gatherings in individual neighborhoods and, increasingly, offers Internet access to public policy procedures. Citizens make suggestions and set priorities. As a result, some 5,000 measures have been initiated directly by the public and 220 million euros have been spent based on preferences they have expressed. The model used in Recife is thus much different than the “citizens' budgets” found in Germany, in that Recife's residents can decide directly how a given share of public funding is spent.

Through its participatory budgeting processes, Recife shows very effectively how collaboration and partnership can be used to reduce the gap between politicians and the public. Moreover, all of the finalists for this year's Reinhard Mohn Prize show that it is always worthwhile to look beyond one's own backyard for new ideas. Representative democracy can be made even more vibrant, and society's citizens encouraged to become even more involved. In sum, these international examples have a lot to teach us!

The Bertelsmann Stiftung has committed itself to carrying out, together with a range of partners, pilot projects that will apply the ideas identified through the first Reinhard Mohn Prize to Germany in the next few years. Today's ceremony therefore also marks a new beginning for us, as we attempt to increase the level of deliberative democracy in Germany.

I would like to wholeheartedly congratulate the city of Recife and the other finalists. They have shown us that with a little bit of courage and imagination we can inspire people to help make meaningful changes in their communities.

I would like to extend my thanks to Chancellor Merkel, who found the time to come and give the presentation speech at today's ceremony. I take that as a sign that the country's decision makers are open for more citizen engagement and for giving ordinary citizens a greater say. Perhaps this will help provide a stable new basis for finding common ground and for increasing social cohesion in Germany.

Thank you.