

**Dr. Jörg Dräger**

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

Dear Chancellor Merkel, Mayor da Costa, Keila, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Keila and 100,000 of her fellow citizens in Recife are showing us in a very impressive way what happens when the public is allowed to participate in decision-making processes: People get involved – again and again, and in a manner that produces concrete solutions.

That kind of civic engagement would be good for us as well, since there is now quite a gap between policymakers and the public in Germany. Too many here feel that politicians no longer represent people's interests and that policy debates have too little to do with the realities of everyday life. Believing that policymakers are not in touch with their lives, people have become disengaged from politics. They have turned away from traditional forms of political participation and question the legitimacy of those forms as a result.

At the same time, disagreements such as those surrounding the Stuttgart 21 railway project, Hamburg's proposed school reform and many local planning processes demonstrate that people do in fact want to play a role politically – although no longer through membership in a political party, but through more direct activities. These activities are, unfortunately, usually only temporary and related to one particular issue. When this desire to be involved is ignored or when people are given the impression that decision-making processes are taking place behind closed doors, they begin to protest. Many would maintain that, as a rule, political participation in Germany means organizing a protest against something, and that the majority of public referenda are designed to reverse policymaking decisions.

That's when people turn into "Wutbürger," or "enraged citizens," to use Germany's Word of the Year for 2010. And even if decision-making processes have been carried out exactly as required, often taking many years to complete, many people still have the feeling that "the powers that be" – whether that means investors, government bureaucrats or politicians – decided all the details in advance and any inclusion of popular input or any questions from the public would just be seen as bothersome interference.

Recife has shown us that things can be different, even under conditions that are much more difficult than those in Germany. I can therefore only congratulate the city on a number of counts:

- Its Participatory Budget program, which has an impact on all areas of the city's development, gets 100,000 residents actively involved each year in policymaking decisions.
- The program allows not only better-educated citizens to get involved, but also includes people of all social backgrounds.
- That means the citizens of Recife, especially the more disadvantaged, feel the Participatory Budget program solves problems that very much impact their lives.
- Not least, this allows Recife to integrate people, including school students like Keila, into political processes over the long term, thereby strengthening democratic structures from the bottom up.

Ladies and gentlemen, the research carried out to award this year's Reinhard Mohn Prize has shown: Other countries have succeeded in establishing citizen participation initiatives that are durable, less exclusionary and, at the same time, highly constructive. We therefore have to ask ourselves: Why hasn't this been the case in Germany?

My attempt to answer this question is based on three observations I made during our recent Reinhard Mohn Prize symposium.

- First, when discussing the term “citizen participation,” all of the German politicians who were present, regardless of their political party, always equated it with a public petition or referendum. That is, their argument was that an increased number of referenda, with as low a threshold for passage as possible, is a sign of better democracy.
- Second, these same politicians expressed the concern that this form of citizen participation was undermining representative democracy and democratic institutions – parliaments and parties. With that, however, they were once again placing the whole concept of citizen participation, which they had just endorsed, in question.
- The third observation was the most intriguing. A city manager and city councilor from Hampton, Virginia, presented the processes for citizen participation that they had developed over the past 25 years. Neither spoke of public referenda or “direct democracy.” When a German participant asked if Hampton’s laws allow citizens to initiate a referendum and how often this happens, both answered that it was indeed possible, but that the city had not had a referendum in 20 years. They added that a robust culture of deliberative democracy exists within *the political decision-making process*, thereby eliminating the need for referenda.

For those leading the way in the area of citizen participation, a public referendum is the *ultima ratio*, almost an admission of failure. The goal of Hampton’s deliberative democracy is to involve people early on, provide all the necessary information and stimulate a balanced debate, not only to lay the best foundation for reaching a decision, but also to ensure broad-based acceptance of the results.

These observations make clear how unfortunate it is when the whole debate on citizen engagement in Germany is restricted to the concept of “direct democracy.” If it remains this way, the country will not experience the sustainable, less exclusionary, constructive forms of deliberative democracy found elsewhere. The marked increase in public referenda in past years is, for me, not a sign of a better democracy – and certainly not a sign of a more efficient one.

As elsewhere, people in Germany want to be informed in detail and early on; they also want to be involved in planning processes right from the start and to have an impact on policymaking outcomes. Based on our research for the Reinhard Mohn Prize, discussions with academics and practitioners and the many comments contributed by members of the public, we have identified three criteria for deliberative governance that reflect the public’s wishes:

**First, anyone who doesn’t invest in citizen participation will have to cover the cost of repairs later on!** Getting people involved often seems to require increased time and effort. But the events in Stuttgart and Hamburg have shown what happens when there is too little inclusion. In those cases, there was no forward-looking investment, and a lot of expensive repair work had to be carried out after the fact. What’s more, people started to look down on the whole political system.

In the future, we have to view citizen participation as an integral part of the policymaking process. We can no longer see it as something the public must come and collect, but something that policymakers must stand up and deliver. It is the responsibility of public officials and government agencies to create serious, early-phase opportunities for citizen engagement. That means creating a reliable legal framework and making the necessary resources available – knowing that they will pay off later.

**Second, when you put mechanisms for deliberative governance in place, what you get are more proactive citizens!** If people in Germany are to become an active part of the county’s policymaking process, our government representatives will have to relinquish part of their legislative powers – at least during earlier phases of the policymaking process, not necessarily for making the final decision itself. Conversely, that means that ordinary citizens must take on more responsibility. The earlier we make such engagement possible – in schools, for example – the easier it will be to establish democratic structures that are open and fair. Above all, disadvantaged social groups and those that

now avoid politics must be given access to these opportunities and must make use of them, since problems will ensue if, as is today the case, mostly well-educated, media-savvy individuals take advantage of new forms of participation.

**Third, traditional forms of representative politics are quite compatible with methods that solicit input directly from citizens.** You often hear people expressing concern that innovative forms of participation diminish the importance of political parties or legislative bodies. Yet in cities such as Hampton, young people vote in elections at twice Virginia's average rate. And in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the processes for deliberative governance have generated so much interest in politics that many more people now run for a seat on the city council than used to be the case. Citizen participation – to the extent that it goes beyond merely initiating a referendum to oppose the powers that be – would also be a plus for representative democracy in Germany.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we chose the motto “Vitalizing democracy through participation” for this first Reinhard Mohn Prize a year and a half ago, we did not yet know how impressive the programs we were going to find would be. They all demonstrate the rejuvenating influence citizen participation can have on a democracy and on society as a whole – and how it can serve to overcome what many see as the gap between policymakers and the public and be used to establish more efficient ways of working together.

Moving democracy forward and increasing citizen engagement were topics that were always important to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's founder, Reinhard Mohn – and they are now timelier than ever, in Germany, in Brazil, in the Middle East. That is why we as a foundation will continue to focus on them. In the next four years, for example, we will be introducing Germany to the innovative approaches pioneered by our finalists, as well as initiatives from elsewhere around the world. We want to encourage public officials and government agencies at the federal, state and local levels to test and formalize new forms of citizen engagement, be they in support of participatory budgeting, infrastructure projects (such as installing new lines to carry “greener” forms of electricity) or methods for helping us respond to demographic change, so that we can remain viable as a society.

Above all, there is one thing that the finalists for this year's Reinhard Mohn Prize have made clear: Citizen participation is not only necessary, it is also feasible. Let us learn together from their examples and begin supporting new forms of deliberative governance that engage us all more directly in efforts to shape society's future.

Thank you.