

*Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)*

# Partizipation im kommunalen Nachhaltigkeitsmanagement

Methoden für die Praxis

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## Abstract

Our lives and those of coming generations will be largely determined by whether and to what extent we achieve the goals set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The responsibility for ensuring this happens lies with actors at all levels of the federal system. Communities, however, play a key role in this process. When it comes to creating sustainable development strategies, they have the considerable advantage that, as well-functioning entities, they can generally build on or further development organizational and decision-making structures that are clear and comprehensible. They can thus motivate people to get involved and address key cross-generational issues that will impact society's future. Sustainability managers at the local level are generally responsible for coordinating the resulting tasks. The goal of this manual is to support them in using participatory methods to build a sustainability management system for their community that covers as many areas of civil society as possible.

The publication is based on the definition of local sustainability management put forward by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, a definition still recognized today. The commission emphasized intergenerational environmental justice for the first time, along with the special responsibility cities and towns have for guaranteeing the livelihoods, basic needs and societal participation of all segments of the local population, while continuously reducing per capita consumption of natural resources.

The evolution of the sustainability debate since publication of the Club of Rome's first report shows that, even though the path from recognizing a problem to solving it can be long and difficult, insisting on change and persevering to bring it about are worth the effort. The Club of Rome's call to strive for a dynamic balance between ecological and economic interests and to include it when considering growth processes has given rise to the belief, particularly at the local level, that concrete steps for achieving sustainable development should be taken and should include wide-scale participation by civil society. Increasingly, efforts are being made to get people actively involved instead of merely giving them access, although the latter is still all too often the case. Many people not only want to be "included," they also want to contribute

more meaningfully to planning and development processes as they occur. There seems to be no fail-safe method for transitioning from mere inclusion to active participation. Although numerous prerequisites exist if participatory processes are to be used successfully, there seems to be no alternative to such processes, especially when future-critical issues such as sustainable community development are being addressed; at the same time, when more people are allowed to participate and more are willing to assume responsibility, the chances increase that outcomes will be meaningful and the risk of failure minimized.

The wheel need not be completely reinvented here, since, ideally, participatory processes can be used as an initial planning aid for practical applications and gradually adapted to actual conditions. However, particular attention must be paid to creating a robust culture of participation and to promoting open, unbiased discussion. The entire range of online tools has thus gained importance in recent years (and especially due to the corona pandemic), a development that has positively impacted the acceptance of IT-driven solutions. This opportunity should be used in a responsible manner.

Local sustainability managers have numerous methods at their disposal for involving different actors and collaborating constructively with what can be very diverse groups. We present 18 examples of such methods in this manual. They all demonstrate that participation can help identify viable solutions to social problems, set communications processes in motion and greatly increase acceptance of the resulting measures – when an effective, unbiased space is made available. This requires everyone involved to be supplied with useful, current information; moreover, the ideas developed during the participatory process must be skillfully selected to facilitate agreement, then condensed and translated into practical terms in preparation for implementation. It also requires sufficient time to build trust.

The manual includes numerous ideas for everyday use that will prove valuable to anyone who wants to promote participation in sustainability management activities at the local level quickly and decisively. The time seems right, since, when it became necessary to respond to the corona pandemic by questioning accustomed behaviors and considering possible alternatives, most people showed how willing they are to adopt a new mindset.