

Bertelsmann Stiftung, Weizenbaum-Institut (Hrsg.)

Nachhaltige Kommunen und digitale Partizipation

Analysen – Beispiele – Empfehlungen

Executive Summary

Sustainable development has emerged as a strategic response to an increasingly complex constellation of interrelated challenges – including climate change, demographic change, digital transformation, globalization and current political crises. As such, it extends across all sectors, encompassing public administration, political institutions, the private sector and civil society, and operates at every level of governance: from local to international.

The local level plays a critical role in this regard. In cities, counties and municipalities, the challenges of sustainable development are immediate and tangible. It is at this level that competing priorities are most visible – and where coordinated responses can be developed and put into practice most effectively.

Participation is a defining feature of sustainable development. That principle holds broadly, but it is especially salient at the municipal level, where residents and representatives of organized interests exert meaningful influence over political decision-making – not least because of the strong tradition of local self-governance. In practice, digital participation has become increasingly important. Yet digital engagement formats bring both promise and peril. Their benefits and drawbacks must be weighed carefully in each case. For municipalities, the task is to navigate what amounts to a »double transformation«: advancing sustainable development while managing the shift toward digital governance.

This edited volume brings together 20 contributions from scholars and practitioners that examine key dimensions of digital participation. Organized into five chapters, the book explores distinct facets of sustainable municipal development.

- **Democratic development:** This chapter focuses on the relationship between digital infrastructure and transparency at the local level. It highlights how limited resources, technical complexity and legal requirements shape efforts to strengthen democratic processes in support of sustainable development.
- **Participation:** The second chapter turns to the practical implementation of digital engagement in sustainable local development. It examines emerging participation

formats and addresses both technical and organizational challenges, including how to motivate diverse stakeholder groups to take part and how to ensure broad, balanced representation.

- **Data use:** This chapter explores how data can be leveraged to steer sustainability efforts at the municipal level. It introduces a range of digital tools, such as dashboards and open data platforms, and considers specific governance questions, including data protection safeguards and the design of effective data governance frameworks.
- **Regional development:** This chapter shifts the focus to sustainable and digital transformation in small and mid-sized municipalities. It underscores the uneven baseline capacities between rural and urban areas. In rural communities, comprehensive digitalization often falters due to gaps in infrastructure, limited technical capacity and shortages of skilled personnel.
- **Cooperation:** The final thematic chapter examines collaboration among relevant stakeholders as a cornerstone of sustainable and digital transformation. It shows how networks, learning labs and digital platforms can facilitate knowledge exchange. At the same time, it stresses that successful digital collaboration depends not only on technology, but also on supportive organizational structures and a culture open to change.

The concluding outlook turns to emerging issues in digital participation within the broader framework of sustainable development at the municipal level. Taken together, the contributions make clear that digitalization, civic engagement and sustainable development are increasingly converging in cities, counties and municipalities – and must therefore be addressed through aligned policy design and implementation.