
Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

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Strategien, Praxistipps und Erfolgsfaktoren
für eine neue Beteiligungskultur in Behörden

Abstract

Overview of the Results

The Participating Citizens in Governance handbook is the result of the Innovation Policy Dialogue on Public Participation – a work group initiated by Bertelsmann Stiftung in December 2011. Over a period of one and a half years, a group of 27 practitioners and progressive thinkers from various ministries, state chancelleries and city councils met together with representatives of Bertelsmann Stiftung. Within the framework of six workshops, the participants discussed the subject of public participation, shared their experiences and pooled their knowledge. These advanced-level discussions took place in an atmosphere of openness, objectivity and cooperation. All of the participants reported on both positive and negative experiences they have had with public participation in their respective administrative contexts. The discussion involved some specific case studies and was supplemented by specialized and scientific input from external sources. The Innovation Policy Dialogue also included a practical examination of tools and methods used in the processes of public participation.

The variety of suggestions and approaches for handling the topic provided the participants with many new ideas. The suggestions also made it possible to thoroughly analyze the various possibilities for public participation within the context of actual administrative scenarios. This allowed for a realistic assessment and analysis of the ideas, providing a good basis for the further development of specific suggestions, including those related to the quality criteria of good public participation. We extend our sincerest thanks to all of those who supported this dialogue through contributing their expertise!

How can real participation bring about a successful outcome, and what factors determine the success of public participation? What risks and opportunities does public

participation present? How can administrative agencies develop a new culture that allows their employees to work in a more flexible and public-oriented manner? These are the key questions that have guided us through the Innovation Policy Dialogue program. We have summarized the most important findings and are presenting them as an overview for you here.

Effective Public Participation Stimulates Representative Democracy

Today, citizens who are self-confident, well informed and willing to participate demand more involvement in policy discussions and want to communicate on equal terms with policymakers and administrative agencies. Representative democracy allows plenty of room for more transparency, dialogue and public participation, without first requiring certain legislative changes; but the path to greater public participation still is not an easy one. Massive public protest in recent years has shown that a greater level of public participation is desirable and necessary; this can also be seen in the fact that political rulings have increasingly been overturned through plebiscitary measures.

Public participation can help agencies to find solutions that are better than “either-or” decisions. Incorporating public opinion does not constitute a weakening of representative democracy. Indeed, it can contribute to a renewal in times of complex problems, low voter turnouts and shrinking parties.

Not only does this require attentive policymakers; it also requires changes in public administration. In Germany, we have an administrative system with a hierarchical structure that has developed and been established over the course of

decades. In its planning and operations, it follows standardized procedures that are based on legal requirements. This kind of system cannot change into an administration that flexibly incorporates external opinions and knowledge overnight. Public participation does not aim at toppling every established structure; at the same time, it cannot take place without some degree of change. To facilitate public participation, it is essential to have specific long-term measures in place for developing key competencies, modernized structures and an acceptable culture of participation.

Increasing Opportunities, Minimizing Risks

Participation is always connected with opportunities and risks. As a general rule, the better such participation is planned and implemented, the bigger the resulting opportunities and the lower the associated risks.

Possible risks include delays in proceedings, the dominance of particular interests, loss of quality, an increased workload, higher costs, and restricted power and authority. All participants share the responsibility of maximizing opportunities by effectively cooperating with each other. Good participation under clearly defined conditions increases the acceptance of decisions and results in more suitable solutions, since they are developed jointly. Participation can take the burden off administrative agencies over the long term, e.g. if cooperations arise between citizens and the administration.

The Path to a New Culture – Consistent rather than Sporadic

The specialists who took part in the Innovation Policy Dialogue all agree that the development of a new culture of participation is a long-term process and that we have

only just begun. Some administrative agencies are already in the habit of involving local members of the public in certain undertakings – though this has generally been on a project-by-project basis so far. It is essential that a more comprehensive culture of participation be developed. This calls for a transformation in the organizational culture of administrative agencies, as well as a change in values, norms and personal attitudes, allowing for a culture of participation to become firmly fixed for the long term. The objective here is for the people and the government to have a relationship of trust – one in which they can meet on equal terms and communicate openly and constructively. A culture of participation enables the employees of administrative agencies to take actions flexibly and to address actual needs.

Policymakers and administrative agencies should take an active approach to this change. The necessity and benefits of this process should be communicated clearly. The change should become a matter of personal priority for administrative heads, and it should be tested and put to practice in the context of actual projects. Planning and decision-making processes should be adapted in such a way that public participation becomes an integral part of considerations and actions taken.

Qualifying Employees – Developing Skills

In order for participation to succeed, managers and administrative employees must also develop new skills. What new skills and what tools do they need to successfully effectuate public participation? Key components certainly include knowledge of the opportunities, risks, goals and methods of public participation, as well as the analytical skills to be able to plan and organize participation processes. Other important skills – which have both inward and outward benefits for an administrative agency – are communicative

and socio-emotional qualifications, such as taking a positive approach to dealing with the unexpected, having the ability to view situations from different angles, and being willing to see things from the other person's perspective.

Acquiring such skills should become a fixed part of employees' training and development. It can be promoted through networks within the administrative agency, through coaching during the course of a project, or through individual study of relevant handbooks and other materials. But the central core of skill development involves the exercise and implementation of the skills in actual public participation projects. Linking real-world projects with theoretical knowledge building is particularly effective.

Participation with Quality

Participation is only effective if it is done well. There are numerous means and different forms of participatory procedures; however, there are some key quality criteria that play a critical role in the success of participatory projects. The publication presented here lists the central questions related to the six most important quality criteria that administration representatives can use to examine such projects' chances of succeeding. These criteria include an inner willingness and openness to participate, as well as an unwavering dedication to the project. Furthermore, there must be sufficient resources, good project management, suitable methods, transparency, and a commitment to implement the jointly established findings.

Participants are aware that this change will not be easy, particularly under current conditions. This is especially true considering that administrative agencies presently face a number of further challenges – such as drastic cost-cutting measures resulting from tense budgetary situations, or the demographic change that is even affecting agencies'

employee structures. Policymakers are thus challenged to set new priorities, even in the areas of finance and staffing.

The path to sustained and consistently exercised public participation is a long and a hard one; but we hope that the Engaging Citizens in Governance handbook will help contribute to the success of public participation in matters of policy and administration – whether in the context of your next participation project or for the long-term goal of bringing about a fundamental change in culture and people's way of thinking.