

Summary

Conference kommunal mobil:

Participatory processes – their underestimated potential for transport planning

26.-27. September 2013

“The aim of participatory processes is to increase support for transport projects among the population and at the same time to also integrate the existing local knowledge into planning. In doing so, it is vital to involve the public right from an early stage.” This preliminary remark became the concept for the conference ‘kommunal mobil IV’ and was reflected and discussed in the numerous presentations and inputs held. The conference was attended by about 90 people.

Various experiences over the last years have shown that even if quality of planning as well as proper procedures are ensured the public still ends up rejecting the projects. Against this backdrop, citizens are now being involved more than is required by law to identify as early as possible potential conflicts that may arise between initiators and affected citizens and to come up with compromises. Participatory processes are vital to prevent delays through public objections voiced at later stages, to make sure projects are accepted, to combine them with a positive message and to ensure the quality of formal participation procedures. They are supposed to provide an answer to the question as to how to achieve a balance among competing influential interests. In addition, participatory processes are not only intended to attract the public’s interest in a project, but also to create understanding and support decisions that will not benefit all stakeholders equally and thus require compromises.

Especially the areas of transport and environment have a range of conflicts, which should be addressed through participatory processes. In her opening address Dr. Katrin Dziekan (Federal environment agency, Umweltbundesamt UBA Dessau-Roßlau) pointed out a number of issues, among them: noise action planning, which is connected to the debate in many cities around zones where speed limit is 30 km/h (18 mph); land use for car parking spaces; air pollution (especially nitrogen oxide) and the creation of Low Emission Zones; and measures to reduce green house gas emissions from transport (road transport accounts for about 20%) and accidents.

However, conflicts cannot be resolved by planners alone; citizens want to be able to have an active role in and an influence on planning processes. Over the last years, this trend cannot only be observed for large projects, but increasingly also for medium-sized and smaller transport projects in urban environments.

The examples drawn from the day-to-day practice of the German cities, such as Tübingen, Bremen, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, Berlin, Mainz, as well as the Hanover region and other municipalities have shown how the cities’ approaches to cooperation among citizens, municipal authorities and policy-makers differ significantly.

It is necessary to extend participation in transport planning far beyond the formal participatory processes regulated by law (urban land-use planning and planning procedures). The guidelines on participation and cooperation in transport planning (*Hinweise Nr. 161: Beteiligung und Kooperation in der Verkehrsplanung*), published by the Road and Transport Research Association FGSV in 2012, provide a comprehensive overview. They specify the

'Guidelines for Transport Planning' (*Leitfaden für Verkehrsplanungen*) published earlier and take account of the contexts and methods for participatory transport planning. Participatory procedures are either consensus-based or cooperative. Examples for processes of public participation include town hall meetings, city walks, as well as project advisory councils (which should be involved in the conceptual phase of a project) as well as various cooperative models (joint decision-making processes, round tables with principle of consensus and experts dialogues). Juliane Krause (plan & rat, Braunschweig) believes that essentially every topic requires a specific concept.

Another form of participation was applied in the ExWoSt project (by BBSR) on active travel in Frankfurt's Nordend district: A book shelf was offered on public roads, a public space was equipped with movable chairs or a temporary *Spielstraße* (play street) was set up. This measure helped to achieve an active participation of citizens in the project carried out in their district. Mona Winkelmann (Department of mobility and transport planning Frankfurt am Main) explained that it was very important to directly involve the people when new designs of street environments in their immediate surroundings are being discussed. The aim of the example from Frankfurt presented above was to improve the quality of the street environments and thus make them attractive for active travel. Another example from Frankfurt is the systematic management of a variety of concerns, where citizens, for example, can fill in a form to report defects on cycle paths or missing storage facilities or parking spaces.

An important finding for participatory processes, such as Frankfurt's Nordend district, was that the framework of what can be discussed and implemented must be clearly defined and communicated early enough. The framework conditions include the primacy of the municipal council or legitimated representatives who gain their legitimacy through democratic elections. They must have the final decision-making authority. However, if a municipal council has already made a fundamental decision and such a decision no longer is to be put up for discussion, this can have a paralyzing effect on the debate. In any case, participatory processes can help to qualify the municipal council and convey the public opinion of the participants. In Frankfurt, for example, the newly established position of an active mobility officer is already a sign of public participation at a personnel level. In addition, a small budget is assigned to implement measures.

What are the benefits, risks and expectations?

The examples that were discussed also highlight the risks and opportunities associated with participatory processes and also the expectations placed on future participatory processes.

The arguments raised in the debates and also noted down on index cards underlined the fact that participation is associated above all with the expectation to recognize resistance at an early stage, to increase the acceptance for municipality actions, to legitimize projects and perhaps also to try and reach out to those who are losing out so that they understand and ultimately accept the decisions. It is important not to see participatory processes in competition with democratic decision-making structures. Rather, through participatory processes the democratically legitimized decision makers are given significant additional input to take into account. This input covers a spectrum of citizens' concerns and needs, and at the same time, involves relevant stakeholders for the implementation.

The success factors are, for example: having competent and experienced local policy-makers; involving policy-makers in the processes; and using the expertise of municipal

authorities acting in an advisory role. In addition, particularly in difficult cases, it is recommendable to have external communication experts as moderators.

One of the barriers is the fear municipal staff have of citizens. There are so called 'professional citizens' who nobody wants to listen to; who take the dialogue too far. In addition, citizens have unrealistic ideas, the formal procedures take far too long and there are many negative experiences with one-sided recommendations, which have a destructive effect and eventually cause frustration and paralysis.

On the one hand, there is the expectation of making public participation part and parcel of planning and life. On the other hand, it raises the question of whether one can and should always involve everybody; and whether the (spatial) demarcation of the groups affected and the continuity of the form of participation sufficiently legitimize the outcome.

Participation on the Internet

The topic 'Internet, eParticipation and Social Media – the Potential of New Media and Communication Practices' - was introduced with presentations by Sebastian Basedow (Zebralog, Berlin), Horst Diekmann (Senate Administration for Urban Development and Environment Berlin), and Katja Striefler (Hanover region). The public expects transparency, participation and a more active information policy of the municipalities. Moreover, Stuttgart 21, the massive protests against the major railway and urban development project, strengthened citizens' confidence in their protest culture. It has become easier to have a say on topics. The Internet lives from participation and there are now a variety of instruments and procedures available to involve policy-makers and experts, via live stream, videos and live chats. The Internet offers the opportunity to combine creativity on the ground and online; it puts people in the driver's seat through active participation. (Vice versa, due to the Internet's ability to mobilize many people, the risk of overturning projects is also higher.) By integrating maps, the Internet can add a new quality to the debate around spatial aspects; and as soon as any interesting information is freely available, new value-added public services are created, sometimes offered in exchange for money for apps.

In general, the success factors for good participation also apply to the Internet. The example of the (city-wide) Berlin noise action plan shows that by using the Internet it was possible to reach out to a wider population. A city-wide participation in noise action planning would otherwise not be possible in a city like Berlin due to the limited financial and personnel resources. The fear that the discussion would be dominated by other topics or conflicts concerning other departments of municipal policy (fundamental question: building of the airport) remained unfounded. It became evident that it is imperative to often react fast on the Internet and the formal procedures and official channels require too much time.

The speaker Katja Striefler (Hanover region) points in particular to the fact that the 'digital natives', the age group of people under 30 years, have a very different way of communicating. For them using Twitter and Facebook is part of their daily routine. With the social web, it is possible to reach out to new target groups. The quality of the debate is improved, the fair balance of interests happens partly on its own because proponents and opponents of a project or an issue use the opportunity to participate in debates. Often the people involved have good ideas, which one would otherwise not think of. What makes social networks so attractive? It is easy to join in; the contents and forms are fun to use and the participants decide for themselves whether and how they portray themselves. Moreover, it

is possible to have an interaction among participants at eye level. Many committed young people do not take part in meetings, but they are fully involved online. It is indeed correct to note that there are high expectations with regard to speed. It is also possible to mobilize for a project online. Participants can click the buttons 'Like' and 'Follow'. The discussion again turned to the question: who participates on behalf of the socially disadvantaged groups. Also those who are no 'digital natives' and work in the municipality must now start to learn to use social media. One thing is for sure: public participation without the Internet is no longer possible.

Representation

Unlike political representatives, participants involved in participatory processes are not elected and legitimized in a representative way. There are the typical 'professional citizens' (often senior citizens with a lot of time on their hands), but there are also selection processes for public participation, which produce a representation (writing letters to a targeted group of citizens via random selection). The question regarding how to find the right stakeholders for these processes is therefore repeatedly raised. Often it is a matter of random selection, but also if the selection is performed in a structured manner, an individual does not necessarily represent the total number of groups, for example, the cyclists. The socially disadvantaged, in particular, only seldom participate in noise action plans. For this reason, residents living in highly frequented main roads, which offer affordable housing for low-income households, participate only little in noise action plans. Whereas educated middle-class families living in structurally better areas strongly articulate their interest for tranquility.

It is possible to put together working groups depending on the citizens' concerns and needs. It is also possible to organize application procedures and choose people who act as multipliers; often the topic of continuity plays an important role in order to make sure that debates that are conducted offline in participatory rounds are carried out efficiently. With view to the sometimes long time periods, the point was raised that also a consensus has an expiration date and therefore, participation results cannot last forever. Many inputs also pointed out that participants who frequently attend various participatory events and committees are often seen and marked down as 'professional citizens' by municipal staff. Furthermore, it was also noted that families with children also show an interest to get involved, however such involvement was very difficult to realize. In order to enable also households with children to join in citizens' meetings, participants should be offered childcare. For many people the topic of public participation simply fades into the background of their hectic daily routine.

Conclusion

In order for public participation to make sense, it is necessary to have a scope for decision-making. Speediness is important in order for the dialogue to run smoothly between municipal staff and citizens. Therefore, sometimes it is imperative to suspend hierarchy in the administration. The online and offline channels for public participation must be linked in a cross-medial fashion. While in the past, one-way information channels were common, today a dialogue is sought and the future lies perhaps in the co-creation, namely involving consumers in planning.

Compared with other European countries, Germany is relatively at the top with respect to the development of the participation culture. However, it is comparatively difficult to inform

and to involve citizens, in particular, due to scarce resources in the municipalities. Participation offers policy-makers substantial knowledge for orientation. However, when it comes to big issues, a representative survey is inevitable. The future lies in opinion formation, instead of referenda. Participation must start at an early stage and be open to any outcome; and not all participatory procedures bring about a consensus. This is also not necessarily the goal, if decisions achieve traceability and acceptance. Public participation requires mutual respect. In case of massive opposition, the municipality's ability to act reaches its limits, also with external moderators. It is important to strive for a modern culture of participation. Also with respect to formal procedures, it is important to think about how to build trust at an early stage. "You always only have one chance."

Open questions

The debate in Dessau-Roßlau rendered possible answers to many questions, but a lot of questions remained unresolved as shown in the final panel discussion. The question remained open as to whether it would be better to have a more formalized procedure and exert a pressure to participate going far beyond the currently existing formal procedures. Another issue is the question to what extent is public participation relevant also for rural regions, for example, when it comes to how to organize for a rural district a participatory process in local transport. It also remained unclear how to deal with the often negative press coverage. The press is a power factor, which can be used through good communication. Another input suggested to have the debate openly online so that pros and cons can already be extensively discussed online, proving boulevard debates, which only seek to bask in headlines, to be futile. With respect to the middle and long-term perspectives, the question is how to move from an 'island of participation' for certain projects to a real culture of participation. Cities such as Heidelberg, Bonn or Leipzig are taking important steps in this direction. They need to be watched with great attention. Against this backdrop, the question was also raised, for example, to what extent can the German Institute of Urban Affairs (Difu), in its training of municipal staff help municipalities make better use of social media.