

Common good is the key

Given the ongoing, profound social change caused by technological networking and globalized economies, we believe that civic participation is a building block that leads people to emancipation and self-organization – in all areas that determine common good: education, healthcare, nature and environmental protection, regional development and urban construction, traffic, water and energy supply.

Civic participation is so valuable because people safeguard their opposing interests and, ideally, negotiate a solution for all.



In an increasingly complex world, civic participation happens in manageable spaces that allow people to enter into contact with each other and build active relationships and affiliations.

In the interplay of a responsible citizenship on one side and politics and administration that they have legitimized by elections on the other, the concept of who represents which interests runs up against its limits. Much too often, complex problems and challenges are solved “for” those affected instead of “with” them.

Which key challenges do we see, and how can taking action be effective?

Power and counter-power

Resistance and frustrations arise when citizens are intentionally presented with done deals, when they are offered participation without scope for influence or when informal power groups prevail, purporting to pursue the common good. Wind turbines, for instance, are planned on a national level so as to leave behind fossil and nuclear fuels; when the plans reach people's own backyard, citizen initiatives often form that oppose wind energy. Another example is inclusion in schools, which is decided about on a state level, but actually opening schools where handicapped and non-handicapped children learn together often fails due to parents' fears that their own child will not receive an adequate education.

Controlled procedures of an early civic participation can help take seriously the worries and troubles of those affected and use their competences for decisions in the interest of the common good.

Resignation or trust

Many resign because they made negative experiences of not being able to make a difference after all, not being heard as an ordinary citizen or facing covert cooperation in an uncontrollable mesh of relations bordering corruption. This often leads to a refusal to participate in political elections; voter turnout in the 2011 municipal elections in Berlin stood at less than 20% in some districts. In addition, there are language barriers and those caused by social or cultural origins. What builds trust, on the other hand, is early availability of information, transparent decision-making processes and participation on many levels that is perceived as positive. Low-key and open forms of participation in the public space can contribute to including more people. In our opinion, priority should be given to creating the conditions that allow especially children and teenagers to find out what it means to be a participating subject early on.

Lobbyism and communication

Even though formal processes of public participation are implemented according to the applicable laws and regulations, for instance when airports are expanded or highways and railway lines are built, this does not necessarily lead to more acceptance. Citizen initiatives and mass demonstrations utterly oppose major projects that are wasteful and one-sidedly geared towards economic interests.

A broadly based public discourse, long before the first sod is turned, creates clarity about the positions and viewpoints of the interest groups. It keeps down undue influence by ideologically-thinking elites, individual commercial interests and operations by representatives in spaces that are closed to the public. The decisive point for mutual understanding is that the discourse is guided from a multipartial standpoint and that all participants are actively involved.

Conclusion

Can a balanced coexistence of power and counter-power be successfully established? Can trust grow and mutual understanding expand? Civic participation that is broadly-based and uses diverse methods can make an important contribution to developing democracy in Europe.

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