

TRIPLEX

Citizen Participation for Democracy and Efficiency

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I Democracy and Participation

More and more people want to become actively involved in politics. In Tahrir Square, Spain or Stuttgart, the time of political apathy is over. The well educated, highly qualified and engaged are the ones who increasingly disagree with the status quo of how decisions are made. They draw in doubt established politics' sincerity in pursuing common wealth, the rationality of administrative implementation and the fair distribution of risks and chances.

We believe that the growing calls for a renewed democracy with participative and performative elements deserve to be taken serious. A *polis* is sustained by the engagement of its *bios politikos*, who's good will is the prerequisite for every *good society (eunomia)*. The objective is therefore to open the right doors for this arising wish for participation so that the ability to take over and carry responsibility can become a constructive force.

Robert Putnam's renown study on the Italian North-South division showed impressively how the engagement of these citizens interested in public affairs can make the difference between sloppiness and efficient administration, alive democracy and corruption, vibrant economy and stagnation. After two decades of research, institutions like the world bank nowadays use the resulting concept of *social capital*.

The newly awakened interest for urban and directly perceivable (*lebensweltlich*) aspects of politics is therefore to be welcomed as a chance to strengthen democracy, civil society and economy. The

wish to channel this energy onto a beneficial track calls for the development of new forms to connect experts, citizens and politicians in a contemporary fashion. The TRIPLEX Participation Method wishes to offer a contribution to this challenge.

II Principles of TRIPLEX

Successful participation has to collect the voices and proposals, that were unheard so far. It shall guarantee the involvement of every social group that is affected by a certain decision without discrimination caused either by a lack of knowledge, the ability to articulate oneself or proper institutionalisation. Consequently, participation should be *empowerment* as well. One principle of TRIPLEX is therefore Habermas' concept of "fairness and competence" to ensure equal terms to all involved parties.

According to Arnstein's categories, the weakest form of participation is the *ex post* involvement in decisions already taken whereas a participatory process started already in the stage when goals are still to be set up is the preferable. TRIPLEX is therefore not a tool to buy legitimacy when no alternatives are left open but a way to guarantee a strong form of participation from an early phase of planing until implementation.

A further principle is to commonly formulate precise goals and scenarios of their realisation. This is accompanied by a self-binding declaration signed by administrative and political decision makers in advance, that they will accept and support the final consensus. Therefore TRIPLEX is more than a simple "citizen dialogue" as it offers a frame where relevant decisions are made and all contributions have importance. It is this appreciation of the invested time and effort that yields the necessary attractiveness to TRIPLEX to win the support of a significant share of citizens and experts for the process.

The moderated integration of experts guarantees that profound knowledge is the background of all meetings held. This moderated expertise furthermore helps to avoid two typical mistakes. That are the monologues of technical experts incomprehensible for lay people, often in ignorance of social and political aspects of a particular technology on the one hand, and purely emotional-subjective debates of citizens on the other hand. The democratisation of expertise and focusing of the opinion spectrum are the two corner stones of TRIPLEX.

III Elements

The participation is constituted by facultative as well as compulsory strategies and methods that have proven to be useful in former TRIPLEX processes.

constitution of groups

The group of people and experts involved in each process has to be defined in the very beginning. It should not exceed the number of 200 people.

When higher numbers are necessary, the target group is divided along city quarters, villages or social groups so it may be partitioned into subgroups with a maximum of 200 persons each. In every such basic cluster a particular participation process is moderated that regularly exchanges information with the other subgroups.

By selecting representatives in each cluster, a supra-group of not more than 200 delegates is formed that constitutes its own participation process in order to unite the positions found in their small groups. This allows theoretically for a maximum of 40.000 people involved, although usually numbers are lower.

The unified scenarios found in the supra-group are not voted upon until they are brought back by the delegates to their subgroups where they are discussed and decided upon. In a second meeting of the supra-group, the decisions of the subgroups are brought forward by each representative. If a consensus has been reached until here, a decision is taken. If that is not the case, differing positions are again focused and simplified in scenarios that are taken back to the sub-groups. This process is repeated until a consensus or a clear majority vote is found.

preparatory study

To prepare the first meeting a pre-study is made with interviews and questionnaires to gather knowledge on existing interests and opinions. The analysed data allows to tailor the participation process for each case as well as to approximate the anticipated difficulties and chances for success so that realistic targets may be set up.

preparatory movie

A simple short movie is produced in advance that portrays the present situation and some typical

statements of involved citizens. It offers a sketch of the task to be worked upon and is displayed in the first meeting.

internet

The process is promoted by an internet page, that is also used to publish first results and allows peer-to-peer communication. Social media platforms can be used as a supplement. This permits participants to continue discussions between the meetings, especially those with particular topics of low interest for the whole public. The meetings are thus more effective as some questions are prepared and worked on in advance.

initial meeting

The first meeting is of great importance for the whole process and therefore well planned. All involved experts and citizens are invited. The TRIPLEX process, its rules and requirements and the problem to be dealt with are explained. That is followed by a discussion of the invited persons which is then summarised with the iterative method to find a smallest commonly agreed denominator.

second meeting

The second meeting is reserved for the involved experts who comment on the findings of the first meeting. This meeting is also closed with an iterative summary.

third meeting

The third meeting is dedicated to administrative and political decisions makers who comment on the findings so far. In case there is already a consensus reached, it is documented and delegated to them for realisation.

further meetings

Most complex topics require more than three meetings. The described rhythm of meetings with citizens, experts and decision makers is then simply repeated as often as necessary. As the understanding between experts and citizens becomes increasingly skilled and background

knowledge widely spread during negotiations, a certain learning effect is expectable. The discussion culture usually enjoys a development that enables participants to work also on complex and conflicting topics with increasing professionalism and efficiency.

negation

If, after a set time limit no consensus is reached, or positions threaten to harden into rivalries, or there is a consensus to turn down a proposal, the participation process is evaluated, documented and finished in a last meeting. This is essential as there was no free decision without an exit option.

realisation

If a consensus is reached citizens should stay involved in necessary further decisions during the implementation phase. The practical realisation however is carried out by the administrative authorities. In some cases it may be an alternative to constitute from the participation circle an economic company which collects funding and realises its proposal independently, so politics and administration rather supports it and do not take over responsibility.

IV References

- renovation of a city quarter in the city Brandenburg-Hohenstücken
- Concept for village renewal, Ebertsheim (Palatine)
- renewal of several city quarters in Cottbus
- noise abatement of rails and streets in Mannheim - Käfertal (Baden-Württemberg)
- noise abatement of air craft, Berlin - Wedding/Tegel - Müllerstraße
- improvement of living environment in Kassel - hölländischer Platz (Hessen)
- noise abatement of low level flights in Ramstein, Sembach, Pferdsfeld (Rheinland-Palatine), Brüggen (Nordrhein-Westfalen)

V Advantages of TRIPELX

TRIPLEX offers a space to exchange and express conflicting, differing or unclear opinions before facts are created. This not only reduces polarisations but increases the awareness for cooperative solutions. Opposing opinions stay in a constant flow as they are discussed and if necessary controversially debated, so they do not harden into manifest opposite positions. Conflicts may thus be avoided and costs for lawsuits and long lasting processing saved.

Local interests and frictions are bargained in their local setting without adding extra burden on institutionalised political arenas. A second advantage of this sub-political approach is the pragmatism resulting from leaving the frame of conventional party-politics. This does not mean that there were not conflicts and factions, but they are limited to the topic concerned. Local questions are thus not processed in perceptions and solutions given by a meta-local level which often complicates the way towards a consensual solution.

On the long term a civil society profits from the increased ability to solve conflicts after a successful TRIPLEX process. The abilities of locals are improved both as experts in a certain topic as well as politically active citizens.

The moderated involvement of decision makers strengthens their legitimacy, as their expertise is no longer perceived as an authoritative *top-down* order but democratically directed and explicitly asked for. The such avoided alienation towards a population results in positive social and psychological effects as well as in a reduction of conflicts and miss-understandings.

Many projects can be implemented at lower costs and with a lower time effort, as complaints and law suits are avoided or reduced.

VI Application

TRIPLEX was developed in city quarter renewals and urban planing with an emphasis on environmental aspects. Further applications planed are:

- energetic convoy renovation of one or several city quarters
- complex projects for city- or village renewal with emphasis on transport, construction, renovation, noise abatement, air quality and fair distribution of costs for locals

- local energy production: wind turbines, solar parks, solar panels and biogas facilities with financial and organisational participation of locals and the administration
- local energy distribution: heat grids, low voltage electricity grids and energy storages for local consumption. Here as well, local possession and planing is intended.
- creation of local value chains with renewable energy involving companies and households, especially for the energetic use of waste.

In general all political matters that can be geographically limited and have become problematic within established routines may be transformed with a TRIPLEX process to find new options and scenarios. “Freedom (...) is actually the reason that men live together in political organisations at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.” (Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa*)

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