

## Dialogue between citizens and the administration: A question of trust

*Florian Dunkel*



The design and execution of engagement procedures frequently focuses on their methodological realisation while little value is attached to the creation of mutual trust. Yet, this is the foundation for constructive dialogue between citizens and the administration. Observing existing information hierarchies between citizens and the administration, employing transparent decision-making processes, and providing information on who is involved at what point, can also build confidence in the course of the engagement procedure. However, making a targeted effort to promote trust between the actors involved before such a procedure is realised is a more expedient. It saves all parties involved time and energy, and consequently leads to a more effective engagement procedure.

### Introduction

In the future, very few urban development projects will be realisable without citizen participation. Yet, in practice, the required dialogue between citizens and the administration is often difficult. Communication failure can often result in resignation on both sides, as well as a negative attitude to engagement procedures in general. In our workshops with administrative staff, we often hear statements, such as “The citizens are not cooperative...”, “They only want to complain, rather than participating in a constructive manner...”, “They have no understanding of the subject matter, and their involvement is selective, not permanent...”, etc. Equally, a similar negative mood can frequently be observed amongst citizens. What makes this even more remarkable is that the fundamental willingness to engage in dialogue is given in many cases. In our opinion, the frequent failure to establish constructive dialogue regardless is primarily attributable to fundamental lack of confidence in the opposition, rather than insufficient legal framework conditions, or the methods employed to organise the involvement. Engagement processes in urban development are complex communication processes with a great range of lines of conflict which are difficult to execute successfully without a minimum degree of trust.

### Lessons from other countries

These findings are consistent with the experiences our CRISP association made when handling conflicts in crisis and post-war regions throughout the past ten years. Here, we observed that a content-based dialogue between various interest groups or conflict parties is only possible if the different perspectives are acknowledged first, and each party is willing to accept the opposition’s mindset, or if this different way of thinking is made transparent.

Conflict research acknowledges this step-by-step approach to handling any type of conflict. Norbert Ropers (comp. Ropers 2003, p. 4) describes a corresponding dialogue process in the following stages: Contact and

confidence building · Creation of empathy · Joint analysis of the conflict issues · Initial considerations for conflict resolution · and joint implementation of possible solutions based on these considerations.

In other words, certain requirements relating to both parties' attitudes must be met before the actual issues in dispute are approached.

## Paying attention to areas of tension

In order to enhance confidence between citizens and the administration, paying attention to three areas of tension that often obstruct successful communication between the two groups can be helpful in the first instance:

- **Information hierarchies:** The administration has typically been dealing with a specific issue for several years in a professional context. It therefore has a significant information advantage which citizens struggle to catch up on. Consequently, it is difficult to realise discussions on an equal footing in terms of expertise. Nevertheless, citizens can contribute important aspects to a planning process by offering their user perspective. Facilitating such contribution requires a conscious approach to the information hierarchies.
- **Decision-making competences:** In engagement procedures, it is often unclear who is making decisions on what and when these decisions are made. Administrations often struggle to let go of decision-making competences, and create a clear framework for decisions. Such uncertainties then exacerbate distrust, and this compromises the engagement procedures. In our experience, enabling citizens to have a voice in every decision-making process is less important than providing clarity on the matters they can make decisions on, and the limits of the procedure at hand.
- **Actor constellation:** Another fundamental question is often who is involved in an engagement process at which point. Amongst the citizens, the range from highly involved through persons affected by the issue to people with only sporadic interest is enormous. While the organisation of closed procedures with small groups of citizens can facilitate more effective processes, this can quickly create suspicion amongst those left out. On the other hand, procedures open to all citizens can quickly fray out, and have a tendency to result in rather general outcomes. Moreover, the administration is often vague about who holds which competences, and who is responsible for which matters. This makes it difficult for the citizens to follow. It can be helpful to use external parties as mediators to address this issue. Generally speaking, the point of involvement of the different actors should be clearly defined before any engagement procedure.

## A practical example: Engagement procedure Tempelhofer Feld

I will use a practical example to illustrate the benefit of incorporating these three fields of tension in the planning of engagement processes, as well as the potential insufficiency of such incorporation for building adequate confidence. The engagement process for the preparation of a development and maintenance plan for the premises of the former Berlin airport Tempelhof will serve as an example here.

Following the successful 2014 referendum which prevented the erection of buildings of the premises proposed by the senate, the objective was to involve citizens in all future development and planning projects for the future of the 360-ha area. After the vote, the senate members in favour of development and the action groups opposed to it appeared rather irreconcilable. However, at the end of the process, the outcome achieved was supported by all sides. Our organisation was responsible for managing conflict throughout the process. In addition, the competent senate administration employed external process coordinators who developed a comprehensive engagement procedure that addressed the aforementioned fields of tension as follows:

- Information inequalities: Weekly thematic workshops were held over the course of several months to develop the development and maintenance plan. In addition to a core group of approx. 30 engaged citizens, the relevant senate administrations were always present to answer questions. It was possible to request information, and this was typically provided immediately or in a later meeting. This ensured a relatively smooth information flow. However, despite the efforts of the senate administration, many citizens still suspected that the administration failed to provide all relevant information. This fundamental distrust was not resolved in the course of the process, and resulted in tedious discussions.
- Decision-making competences: The process coordinators were responsible for structuring the process such that the inclusion of the diverse requirements of the different actors in the development and maintenance plan was maximised. To this end, the citizens and the administration discussed individual aspects of the development and maintenance plan in-depth during the thematic workshops. During the process, however, it was not always clear how the multitude of contributions to the discussion was meant to result in a common end product. Finally, the development and maintenance plan was put together in small editorial groups to the satisfaction of the majority of the parties involved. Nevertheless, uncertainty about decision-making competences of the different groups throughout the process resulted in frustration in many instances which, we believe, slowed the process down significantly.
- Actor constellation: The senate administration provided permanent contact persons who attended the weekly meetings. This greatly helped to build confidence, but also required significant administration resources. The process coordinators attempted to strike a balance between an open and a closed process in terms of citizen inclusion. Thus, in addition to the weekly meetings for highly-engaged persons that dealt with various issues, users of 'Tempelhofer Feld' were addressed directly in a 'summer of participation'. The challenge was to clarify which opinions should take precedence if the outcomes of the different involvement formats were in competition with each other. In the end, the outcomes of the 'summer of participation' were understood as a source of inspiration for the process with the highly-engaged citizens, and incorporated in the textual work for the development and maintenance plan during the thematic workshops.

Thanks to the efforts to consciously address the different fields of tension, an outcome that was supported by both, the administration and the citizens, was achieved despite the difficult starting point. Nevertheless, the process was characterised by frequent distrust which also triggered minor escalations. Keeping both parties at the table required a lot of time and energy throughout the process, and contentious points frequently required mitigation. This compromised the objective debate.

### Understanding rationales – building confidence

In our opinion, the repeated emergence of conflict despite all the efforts to engage in a constructive dialogue is attributable to a failure to focus on building trust between the actors before the initiation of the process.

In particular, the parties lacked understanding of the opposing standpoint. However, an engagement procedure can only be successful if each party has a fundamental insight into the opposition's rationale. While this may appear trivial at first glance, it constitutes a complex challenge. This is because the views of each interest group tend to be convincing and coherent. Especially actors deeply involved with an urban planning project – such as the administration or an action group – often struggle to consider arguments outside their own line of reasoning. Consequently, they fail to see that their view seldom encompasses all issues, and that the opposition's view is also justified. While an understanding of the other perspectives does not resolve conflicts of interest, it is a prerequisite for constructive handling of such differences. A party can only

offer adequate compromises if it is able to translate the actions of the opposition into its own way of thinking. The fact that the challenges of modern and integrate urban development require a higher degree of cooperation between very different actors makes this even more crucial.

And above all, this is the basis for further cooperation. Any compromise agreed only becomes effective and viable if the actors involved trust the other party to implement the agreements reached. Otherwise, each party may attempt to employ delaying tactics and indirectly assert its own interest through realisation.

Thus, confidence-building measures should always precede an engagement process where required. These can be executed both, in direct exchange between the interest groups, and through awareness-raising measures for individual actors. Simulation games and other methods that facilitate a change in perspective may be helpful for this purpose.

## About the author

Florian Dunkel is a political scientist, founding member of the non-profit association CRISP, and Member of its Executive Committee since 2008. The association is involved in the field of conflict management and political education in Germany and abroad, and conducts simulation games for these purposes. In this capacity, Florian Dunkel has managed numerous conflict management projects, especially in Southern Caucasus, Morocco, Western Balkans and Ukraine. In recent years, he increasingly deals with engagement conflicts relating to urban development.

Contact: [dunkel@crisp-berlin.org](mailto:dunkel@crisp-berlin.org)

## Literatur

---

Ropers, N., From Resolution to Transformation: The Role of Dialogue Projects. Berghof Forschungszentrum für konstruktive Konfliktbearbeitung, 2003

---

Informationen zum Beteiligungsprozess rund um das Tempelhofer Feld sowie der fertige EPP können unter diesem Link eingesehen werden: <https://tempelhofer-feld.berlin.de/>

---

Weitere Informationen zu CRISP unter: [www.crisp-berlin.org](http://www.crisp-berlin.org)

---

© European Academy Berlin, June 2017  
This paper reflects the opinion of the author.

## Contact

European Academy Berlin  
46/48 Bismarckallee  
14193 Berlin, Germany  
+49 30 895951 0  
[eab@eab-berlin.eu](mailto:eab@eab-berlin.eu)  
<http://www.eab-berlin.eu>