

## Good Governance – civil society and civic engagement in Germany

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Good governance aims to include civil society actors in government policy processes and implementation. Civil society performs a variety of functions and consequently good governance crucially requires the development of a sustainable, cross-cutting policy geared towards providing a framework for civic engagement and a civil society infrastructure. This must be followed by the implementation of good governance at local government level. In addition to civil society infrastructure, it should include appropriate local government models and standards for quality of citizen participation.

The term “governance” primarily refers to a situation where not only steering and oversight within particular political and social units are implemented by the state (“First Sector”), but also by private business (“Second Sector”) and a “Third Sector” (associations, organisations and lobbies).

In contrast to direct, top-down management and unlike “government” as commonly understood, those organisations, entities or individual actors that are the subject of governance are seen as playing an active role in resolving their specific tasks and challenges and should, in principle, enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in doing so. The term “governance” is also often used to denote cooperation between several actors (see Benz 2006).

### The functions of civil society

Civil society acts as a monitoring and early warning system, an amplifier of public opinion and a channel whereby social problems can be articulated. In addition to these political functions, civil society also serves as an advocate for the interests of marginalised and socially weak groups, and further engages in public interest lobbying, thereby contributing to the agendas pursued by human rights, women’s, environmental and development aid organisations. However, civil society is also an important arena for political socialisation and learning (Klein 2013). From a social point of view, civil society can make significant contributions to social integration. Any academic discussion of its “social capital” rightly stresses its bridging function which helps to counteract the segregation, exclusion, stereotypes and demonisation that threaten the civility even of democratic societies (for civil society, see Klein 2001). Finally, civil society also contributes to the co-production of social services. This function covers not only the immediate social environment in which people live (self-help, neighbourliness) but also social services such as caregiver and hospice work, cultural provision, the environment and nature conservation.

## Engagement policy agenda

In the wake of the German Bundestag's Enquête Commission on "The Future of Civic Engagement" (1999-2002), the first comprehensive set of aims and objectives for the engagement policy agenda was developed outlining the central principles underpinning a reform of civil society policy (Enquete-Kommission 2002; Evers et al. 2003; Olk 2007).

No policy geared towards promoting civic engagement can remain confined to any single government department such as social affairs or healthcare. It addresses cross-cutting issues and consequently is relevant to all policy areas. Accordingly, engagement policy, regardless of whether it operates at local, federal state or federal level, must have a dual strategic focus: on the one hand, it has to include an overarching model for the development of engagement policy across society as a whole and at the same time it must ensure that the measures and programmes based thereon are rolled out to and implemented within individual policy fields.

## Recommendations

- institutions and organisations should be designed to meet the needs of civil society and be embedded therein;
- direct democracy forms of participation should be increased at all levels of the federal state (through citizens' initiatives, local referendums, etc.);
- the public administration should be citizen oriented and open to dialogue with civil society;
- deliberative structures for participation should be created (e.g. round tables, consultative committees, planning cells);
- efforts should be continued to build a culture of recognition;
- networks should be established incorporating actors from all parts of society at every level and efforts should be continued to build an infrastructure for promoting engagement;
- businesses should be encouraged to assume greater responsibility and make voluntary commitments within the community;
- engaged citizens should be afforded better protection to compensate for disadvantages suffered (e.g. liability protection, insurance cover, etc.);
- the law governing non-profit organisations and charitable donations should be reformed; and last but not least,
- we should seek to improve our knowledge in the field of civic engagement (basic research, evaluation, quality assurance, etc.).

## Local governance and civic engagement: approaches to engagement policy at local government level

Citizen engagement finds its strongest expression in the immediate social environment in which people live. Local government would therefore be well advised to support and promote this type of engagement and adopt a constructive attitude towards concerns raised through citizen participation. The issues confronting local authorities cover a wide spectrum from new standards of political participation to the promotion of key projects and facilities and cooperation with citizens on major local government plans and projects. These important functions have given rise to a policy debate over the best models to be adopted to promote engagement.

## Local government models

The “Enabling State” can take measures to improve the framework for civic engagement and civil society organisations. This can include everything from insurance cover and training for engaged citizens to fiscal policy and support for the infrastructure needed to facilitate engagement.

The “Activating State” can encourage disengaged groups to become more engaged by, for example:

- making voluntary youth services more attractive to lower secondary school (Hauptschule) students;
- promoting networking in a particular neighbourhood;
- offering unemployed people the opportunity to use their skills in ways that benefit society.

The “Guaranteeing State” withdraws from the direct performance of its duties when these can be better performed by civil society actors, but retains responsibility for ensuring that these duties are performed to a satisfactory standard.

## The “Bürgerkommune” model: daring to increase participation

The German Center for Local Authorities’ Management Studies (Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle, KGSt) in Cologne recently updated the Bürgerkommune (networked administration) model that was first discussed back in the 1990s (KGSt 2014). The fundamental components of the Bürgerkommune are transparency, civic engagement, citizen participation and cooperation in networks. As such, the Bürgerkommune incorporates an open government model in which one outcome of civic engagement could be to increase levels of participation in change processes. Not only are participation processes based on this approach feasible but they actually offer major benefits to local authorities by supporting the decision-making processes of politically mandated representatives. This type of support is one of consultation. Members of district assemblies or local/town councils subsequently take their own decisions about what they are prepared to accept. In other words, their political mandate is not, in any way, undermined.

The KGSt recommends that local authorities which choose to go down the Bürgerkommune route should **open up their governance processes to the public** by creating transparency, providing opportunities to participate and space for voluntary engagement while seeking to actively work together with the local community (KGSt 2014). Any initiative that introduces direct participation arrangements must respect the role and position of councillors and district assembly members, insofar as they are elected representatives and enjoy a political mandate. Therefore, they must be involved by the public administration at an early stage. A Bürgerkommune can only be developed in close collaboration with politicians, and not in opposition to them. All the local authorities that contributed to this article stressed how important it was for politicians and the highest levels of the public administration to reach **a shared basic understanding** prior to any subsequent work with all groups of actors in the local community to draw up guidelines that apply to everyone. Ideally, this process should be the outcome of a successful dialogue.

## Quality standards for citizen participation

Quality standards for citizen participation in local government must exist and be implemented. The following standards were identified and compiled by the Netzwerk Bürgerbeteiligung:

Citizen participation...

1. ... requires a willingness and ability to engage in dialogue.
2. ... requires resources and the establishment of clear goals and frameworks.
3. ... makes use of existing creative opportunities.
4. ... is a dialogue between equals.
5. ... is binding and reliable.
6. ... requires careful and competent design of the participation process.

7. ... requires transparent information.
8. ... allows everyone to get involved.
9. ... learns from experience.
10. ... is embedded in a local participation culture.

(see Netzwerk Bürgerbeteiligung 2013: <http://www.netzwerk-buergerbeteiligung.de/kommunale-beteiligungspolitik-gestalten/qualitaetskriterien-buergerbeteiligung/> accessed on 12 June, 2016)

### Figure 1: Components of an engagement policy agenda

- Strengthen civil society and civic engagement
- Improve the legal, institutional and organisational framework for civic engagement
- Ensure that welfare reform programmes and measures are compatible with engagement
- Drive the development of a culture of recognition of civic engagement
- Continue to develop education and training measures for engaged citizens
- Strengthen local civil society
- Continue to develop voluntary services
- Include all organisations and institutions involved in participation and civic cooperation
- Reform the public administration to support engagement
- Continue to promote engagement at federal and federal state levels
- Consolidate and develop infrastructure for promoting engagement at local government level
- Promote civic engagement among immigrants
- Strengthen European civil society
- Support local alliances
- Develop cooperation between civil society, business and the state
- Strengthen and develop corporate citizenship among businesses

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