

District development, participation, trust – Promoting cooperation between administration and citizens

An interview with Katja Niggemeier

Social participation and citizen co-determination are crucial for enhancing the quality of life in a district. Politics and the administration are responsible for providing or implementing a suitable framework, and that requires relevant resources, as well as the administration's and the citizens' willingness to cooperate. The specific arrangement will depend on the fields of application earmarked for the stimulation of processes. Katja Niggemeier, Head of Brunnenstrasse Neighbourhood Management in the district Berlin-Mitte explains in this interview how cooperation between administration and citizens can work.



Why is it important to promote constructive local cooperation between administration and citizens based on trust?

The immediate habitat, the living environment, is organised to a higher quality standard if local knowledge is utilised and combined with the administration's expertise. A resilient platform for negotiating different interests – for dialogue – is a key requirement for a successful community. It strengthens the legitimisation of projects. Trust-based cooperation between the administration and the citizens creates understanding for each other's perspective.

In the Socially Integrative City Programme, the district commissioners – i.e. the local neighbourhood management teams – are responsible for mobilising the people in the neighbourhood, and supporting them in their self-organisation in a sustainable manner. At the same time, the team assumes a mediator role between the interest and requirements of the citizens, and the substantive, legal and human resource limits of the administration.

Based on the experiences gained in the Socially Integrative City Programme, local politicians and institutions (childcare centres, schools, neighbourhood centres, sports clubs, religious groups, etc.), as well as business operators must be integrated, and – if possible – also owners, e.g. state housing associations.

How have citizen expectations of the administration, and of the administration's capacities changed in Germany – and, in particular, in Berlin – in the past 10-20 years?

The number of employees in public service has fallen drastically in recent years while the city has seen rapid growth. Citizens moving into the area, for instance, have many concerns and expectations, including of the administration. Meanwhile, citizens expect the administration to support their concerns. They need specific qualified contacts whom they can find with ease, e.g. at a click on the internet.

What methods, instruments and strategies can be employed to make cooperation between the local administration and citizens constructive and productive?

In principle, the local administration must have access to adequate financial, human and time resources, i.e. administration must be citizen-centred and service-oriented. Moreover, facilities, such as suitable meeting places, a uniform information system accessible to everyone within the administration, and qualification options for employees are necessary.

The specific arrangement of the cooperation will depend on the fields of application earmarked for the stimulation of processes. In relation to process-based, joint neighbourhood development, the creation of binding, transparent and understandable structures, the description of the interfaces with the citizens, and specific points of contact in the administration are paramount. Ideally, these are developed together – as was the case in the development process for the ‘Guidelines for Citizen Participation in the District Berlin-Mitte’¹.

I believe it is important to focus on creating formats where the administration and citizens meet directly and regularly, rather than only based on specific occasions. A good example is the citizen forum in the Mitte district. This is also a question of appreciating the citizens and their concerns, and facilitating communication other than through mediators. Political representatives should also participate in these formats.

How can the inclusion of socially weaker groups in the dialogue be improved?

Within the Socially Integrative City Programme, this is primarily achieved through a direct approach as part of continuous community work. The people in the neighbourhood like using free offers, such as regular breakfasts, the neighbourhood café, flea markets, sewing courses and other creative activities, movement classes or parent-child groups. These offers allow e.g. neighbourhood managers or district coordinators to start talking to these people, inform them about changes in the area, listen to their needs and concerns, and pass these on to the administration. Occasion-based invitations to events with flyers, posters or online adverts seldom reach beyond those who were interested anyway.

Continuity of contacts should not be underestimated here, as people need to build trust in them.

Digitalisation, participation, active contribution: How will the citizen/administration interface develop in the future, especially in Berlin?

I take the perspective of urban development. The State of Berlin wants to improve citizen participation in urban development projects and processes, and has initiated a process for the development of guidelines. This aims to formulate principles, and ensure participation opportunities. The Berlin-Mitte district already has coordinated guidelines for citizen participation, and is currently setting up an office to realise and support them.

In my opinion, the Socio-Spatial Planning Coordination Organisation Unit (OE SPK) is a key instrument with regards to the provision of a structural and process-oriented interface. Ultimately, the plan is to establish it in all the districts of Berlin on the basis of real-life oriented spaces (LOR). In principle, the SPK comprises three areas – area coordination in the District Office, local district coordination, and data coordination. In the Berlin districts where it is already implemented, some of the arrangements differ. The important thing is, however, that the local coordination offers formats that attend to the residents’ interests. This is why I believe that they should ideally be linked to an existing neighbourhood centre.

Digitalisation offers a great range of information and communication possibilities for cooperation and service provision. It also plays an increasingly significant role in shaping public opinion, and in the connectivity

of actors. Digital media – in particular, social networks – can e.g. support participatory processes with juveniles, which helps to lower thresholds and simplify execution.

We have maintained a Facebook presence for the area of neighbourhood management for around six years. However, this is almost exclusively used for information purposes. Some colleagues are already using online tools – such as the Adhocracy software available free of charge from the State’s participation platform mein.berlin.de – to query concerns, needs, resources and potentials of the residents. The platform was also utilised for online participation relating to the guideline processes for citizen participation. The digital dialogue will not replace the analogue, direct dialogue. But it will certainly supplement and support it to an ever greater degree.

Mediator, advocate, agent? How would you describe the role of L.I.S.T. in this context?

L.I.S.T. is active in the fields of district development, project management and participation. In all fields of activity, our objective is to develop sustainable solutions based on a broad civic foundation that satisfy the contexts of current developments affecting the whole city and society as a whole.

In our projects, we enter into an open dialogue with all relevant actors. Together with the citizens, politicians and the administration, funding bodies for social and cultural institutions, associations, business operators and housing associations, we determine the scope for action, promote the willingness to assume individual and social responsibility, and advocate for fair balancing of interests and conflict resolution between the parties involved.

Literatur

¹ <https://www.berlin.de/ba-mitte/politik-und-verwaltung/service-und-organisationseinheiten/sozialraumorientierte-planungskoordination/leitlinien-zur-buergerbeteiligung/>

Katja Niggemeier

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