
## Participation: Fair and transparent planning of major projects

Large infrastructure projects such as transport networks, waste management facilities and power generation plants often result in significant landscape change. The German energy transition (Energiewende) demonstrates this very clearly: wind and solar electricity production has to be further expanded, existing electricity transmission networks upgraded or new ones built, and energy storage capacities increased.

Although there is generally a high level of support for the energy transition, for example, specific projects such as wind farms and power lines often encounter substantial opposition from local communities. This is not surprising, for these projects often create local challenges which weigh against the benefits to society as a whole.

If provision is made for the maximum feasible level of citizen engagement, this opens up opportunities to improve democratic decision- and policy-making while reducing the potential for conflict. However, it also creates new challenges that must be managed, such as the need to comply with legislation while meeting expectations that stakeholders will have a say.

## Participation – not just information

Participation involves much more than simply providing information for the public, and it also goes further than the forms of consultation prescribed by law. It may enhance or indeed precede these forms if it seems likely that the statutory public consultation procedures will be inadequate in terms of conflict management. In such cases, participation is likely to consist of informal modes of citizen engagement which are non-statutory, cannot be demanded by right and whose outcomes are therefore non-binding.

Nevertheless, the legislature has recognised that citizens are demanding more of a say in planning processes. It has therefore established a requirement for public authorities to build public consultation into high-impact projects at an early stage. The authorities must offer informal dialogue-based formats that enable the public to have a say before decisions are taken. This enables a wide range of interest groups and stakeholders to be consulted, with their views reflected in whichever solution is agreed.

In principle, participation is voluntary. No one can be forced to take part. Germany's Commission on the Storage of High-Level Radioactive Waste is a case in point: a number of campaign groups distanced themselves unequivocally from the consultation process. However, this is also one of the

weaknesses: anyone who is not actively involved can still claim afterwards that they do not support the decision. There is also a risk that some interests will not be addressed.

## Gaining a hearing, shaping the agenda

In a participatory process, all interested parties must have the opportunity to make their voices heard. However, it is not only about “being heard”: the ideas and arguments presented should also feed into the decision-making process. Participation processes can (but do not necessarily) enhance the legitimacy of the outcomes and produce “better” decisions as the knowledge base is broadened if local communities are involved.

In participatory wind farm planning, for example, it has been possible to carry out nature conservation measures, such as installation of bat boxes, in cooperation with local environmental groups. The siting of the individual wind turbines, too, is ultimately a compromise between optimal power yield, nature conservation issues, local communities’ various concerns and the energy transition’s public interest objectives.

Furthermore, opportunities for financial participation, for example in a community wind farm, increase the likelihood of a consensus being achieved on the outcomes of a participatory process. What is important, however, is that the process is seen to be transparent and fair. The resulting decision is then more likely to be accepted by the local community.

## The limits to participation

A limit to participation must be set wherever it is likely to encroach on the competent authority’s decision-making powers. The authority’s decision should never be pre-empted. There are, however, opportunities for public authorities to be involved in participatory processes.

For example, the authority may look at a consensus-based proposal and consider it as one of its options. It may also be possible to achieve a situation in which the sponsor takes ownership of the outcomes of the participation process and builds it into the project application. Before any participatory process, it is essential to clarify how the outcomes are to be managed, as the participants will expect some kind of response to their efforts.

## Real-world laboratories – civil society and research in tandem

Real-world laboratories are a fairly new type of research format which goes beyond the hitherto widespread form of citizen participation in planning and research and makes specific provision for shared control of the agenda. In real-world laboratories, stakeholders from civil society work with researchers to develop ideas and projects that are implemented jointly and whose results are then evaluated.

Real-world laboratories are becoming increasingly popular as a means of initiating transformation processes, for example, and for researching their prospects of success and implementation options. It is important, in this context, to initiate bidirectional learning processes, i.e. a two-way flow of information, between researchers and stakeholders. In transformation research, real-world laboratories are regarded as key elements of social learning.

The Knowledge Dialogue Northern Black Forest is a current example of a real-world laboratory. As part of a transdisciplinary consortium with research partners from forest sciences and tourism, the Oeko-Institut is working with civil society to investigate sustainable mobility in rural regions of the

Northern Black Forest. This has involved conducting interviews and holding workshops on existing modes of innovative mobility, available capabilities and barriers to implementation.

Knowledge Dialogue Northern Black Forest website

## Study: "Social participation processes, participatory research and knowledge integration methodologies"

The Environmentally and Socially Compatible Transformation of the Energy System research programme was supported by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and ran from 2013 to 2017. In partnership with the Institute for Social-Ecological Research (ISOE), the Oeko-Institut collated the results of a total of 33 publicly funded projects which looked at the topic of participation and citizen engagement in diverse contexts from a variety of perspectives.

The study revealed that most participation projects actually involved a fairly low level of engagement, mainly consisting of information provision and consultation. There was rarely any opportunity for genuine citizen engagement, in the sense of collaboration or shared control of the agenda.

## How can a stronger practical element be integrated into research?

The term "participatory research" comes from transdisciplinary research, which focuses on cross-sectoral cooperation between academics and practitioners. It can take a variety of forms:

- involvement of civil society stakeholders in the design of the research framework, with a final reflection on the information generated (co-design)
- involvement of civil society stakeholders in the entire research process, with co-generation of knowledge (co-production)
- long-term cooperation between researchers and practitioners, e.g. in real-world laboratories.

The increasing popularity of transdisciplinary research stems from the recognition that the expertise of stakeholders – from civil society, business and politics – is indispensable in identifying solutions to complex real-world problems. By integrating these diverse stores of knowledge, it is possible to identify holistic pathways towards solutions, transcending the more specialised agendas within the individual disciplines.

Study: *Gesellschaftliche Partizipationsprozesse, partizipative Forschungsmethoden und Methoden der Wissensintegration* (Social participation processes, participatory research and knowledge integration methodologies), for the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF)

## Practical example: Scientific support for the Airport and Regional Forum (FFR) at Frankfurt Airport

Since the expansion of Frankfurt Airport with the opening of a fourth runway, a voluntary local process supported by the State of Hesse has been under way to identify potential solutions and to research and implement active noise abatement measures. The Airport and Regional Forum (Forum Flughafen & Region – FFR) consists of representatives of various bodies that work on aircraft noise.

The Forum brings together the airport operator and representatives of the airlines, municipalities, local stakeholders and other experts, e.g. from the German Aerospace Centre (DLR).

The Oeko-Institut has supported the Forum in a scientific advisory capacity for many years. Most notably, it provides support to the Expert Group on Active Noise Abatement (ExpASS), whose various working groups look at issues such as optimisation of the approach and departure procedures, research on noise reduction technologies for aircraft, and the calculation, monitoring and assessment of aircraft noise with the aim of reducing aviation noise pollution in the locality.

Background information from the Oeko-Institut: *Fluglärm: Rechtliche Expertise, Wissenschaftliche Begleitung, Wirkungsforschung* (Aircraft noise: legal expertise, scientific research, impact monitoring)

## Further information

Current project: *Öffentlichkeitsbeteiligung bei der Endlagersuche* (Public participation in the search for a final storage site) on behalf of the German Federal Office for the Safety of Nuclear Waste Management

Study: *Transparenz Stromnetze – Stakeholder-Diskurs und Modellierung zum Netzausbau und Alternativen* (Transparency and power grids – Stakeholder discourse and modelling of grid expansion and the alternatives)

Study by the Oeko-Institut: *Auswertung verschiedener Formate der Öffentlichkeitsbeteiligung im Umfeld kerntechnischer Anlagen und Einrichtungen* (Evaluation of various formats for public participation around nuclear installations and facilities)

Study: *Perspektiven der Bürgerbeteiligung an der Energiewende unter Berücksichtigung von Verteilungsfragen* (Perspectives on citizen participation in the energy transition, taking account of distribution issues)

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