

Civil Society and Participation

Heinrich Mann:

"Democracy is basically the recognition that, in a social sense, we are all responsible for each other."

Civil society

What exactly does "civil society" mean? In German, we call it "Bürgergesellschaft" or "Zivilgesellschaft" – and in English, the common terms are civil society and civic society. Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably as synonyms. At other times, they are used to make a conscious distinction between different basic views of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

These days it seems that just about everyone is talking about "civil society". The roots of civil society, however, date back to the 18th century (Adam Ferguson, "Essay on the History of Civil Society", 1767; Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America", 1835/1840). In Europe, the current importance of civil and civic society stems primarily from the recent freedom and democracy movements in Eastern Europe. Within this context, civil society became the rallying cry for efforts to end the dictatorial rule of the state and give people the freedom to take part in collective action.

For the purposes of this article, I will refer primarily to the definition of civil society put forward by the Foundation for Citizens' Cooperation (*Stiftung MITARBEIT*) on its "A Guide to Civil Society in Germany" Internet portal at www.buergergesellschaft.de (where Adrian Reinert is the main contributor). Among the many examples on their website, we find the following description:

"Civil society is all about collective action. More precisely, it is about **democratic collective action**, independent of the state and outside the market. Civil society is not a condition, but rather a process, which can be fostered and promoted by creating certain conditions."

Civil society exists on a number of levels. It stands for a vision of democracy where men and women get involved, work to further their interests, join forces, and take on responsibilities. This is a vision where active citizens and their organizations have greater importance and influence than they do today.

But civil society is also a reality. It embraces the actions and work of civil society groups, including NGOs, social movements and networks. It stands for commonly used approaches and methods to foster participation. This is the main way that citizens get involved in issues, both in our society and in many other societies.

This year, researchers in Germany have published a major study on citizen involvement in 1999 and 2004. The results show that far from declining, the level of involvement is actually increasing. Various theories have emerged to explain the wide range of motives and types of involvement. Organizations are steadily improving their volunteer management skills, and there is ongoing debate and development on the issue of improving the conditions for involvement in the political realm and through political

means (for example, commissions of inquiry, insurance settlements at the state level, etc.). Involvement is also enhanced by the presence of a supportive infrastructure, such as the one that Germany has increasingly worked to develop.

Civil society has also become a reality in local communities to allow them to ensure services and activities that they cannot or can no longer offer.

In a broader sense, civil society also reflects a mentality that emphasizes public spirit, civil courage and solidarity. But civil society is also about an attitude and a readiness to get involved, to take responsibility – an attitude that rejects the idea of leaving everything up to an all-powerful state.

While civil society is a dynamic process that thrives on committed individuals, it does face a number of challenges.

Today's society places high demands on career flexibility and mobility, and these individualization processes diminish the degree of solidarity within society. People have to reorient themselves again and again as traditional and social networks disintegrate.

Entire segments of the population such as migrants, socially disadvantaged groups, and the elderly find themselves increasingly marginalized. In fact, citizens with a higher level of education and a secure income continue to show a greater willingness to get involved and enjoy a greater degree of participation than groups on the margins of society.

The definition of civil society as existing "outside the confines of the state and the market" is not watertight. Civil society players also require financial support to carry out their work. This means that they are partially dependent on the state or rely on revenues from the market. By promoting civil society, the state assumes an active role, securing to a certain extent the involvement and participation of citizens as a valuable social resource.

One of the main functions of civil society is to ensure that there is room for critical voices alongside the power structure of the state. A democratic state without a civil society loses its legitimacy – its only remaining mandate stems from regularly held elections – and it increasingly takes on the role of an administrator, governing citizens instead of allowing citizens to shape the government.

Sometimes, however, the state and civil society act as alternative systems for problem solving. At a "Civil Society Forum" recently held in Berlin, the following statement was made with regard to the different ways that problems are tackled by civil society and the state: "While the state usually operates in one sector, for a limited period of time, and attempts to intervene with large sums of money, civil society focuses on players from various sectors and with various skills, on networking them with each other, and on reciprocal exchanges of knowledge as well as long-term cooperation."

In reality, the state and its administration have a difficult relationship with civil society. This was alluded to by BUND chairwoman Angelika Zahrt at the civil society forum: "The state, in its role as guardian and supervisor, tends to adopt a condescending attitude toward the players of civil society. They are welcome when a stopgap solution is needed, but they are seen as troublemakers wherever they try to get involved."

Participation

As previously mentioned, participation is a key element of civil society. Civil society provides an avenue for citizens to shape "their" state so that it reflects their needs.

After all, the term participation is used in widely different contexts. Participation has to do with people taking part in society, participating or having the opportunity to participate in cultural, economic and social life.

In a political sense, participation serves to shape public opinion and decision-making, and legitimize decisions.

In a concrete sense, participation means that citizens show initiative, have a say, and take part in decisions that concern them. The term citizens refers to all members of a community. In addition to eligible voters, it includes children and youth as well as migrants who in their current living situation may not enjoy any civil rights in their country of residence.

Participation is also the general term for all measures and initiatives that allow citizens to take part in decision-making processes. While the scope of this involvement is often ensured by legal regulations and formal guidelines, its impact is also limited by these very same structures (for example, hearing deadlines, quotas for applications, etc.).

In many ways, participation offers concrete advantages and benefits:

- Motivation – When people participate, they are more motivated to get involved and take responsibility for themselves and for others.
- Citizens' skills – Participation methods provide an opportunity to incorporate and use the knowledge, skills and expertise of citizens in planning and decision-making processes.
- Quality and legitimacy – Participation can improve the quality of decisions and enhance their legitimacy.

Political involvement

There are a number of ways for citizens to get involved and participate in decisions. In Germany, these include:

- Elections (general)
- Rallies (demonstrations)
- Campaigns (to shape public opinion on a specific topic)
- Direct involvement (public institutions like schools, homes, social security)
- Initiatives (referendums)
- Community activities (town meetings, competent citizens)
- Advisory boards (councils on foreigners, senior citizens)
- Hearings (planning, legislation procedures)
- Petitions
- New forms of political involvement:
citizen budget, e-participation

Methods of citizen participation

There are a vast number of forms of participation that focus on a wide range of issues. What all of these methods have in common, is that they are often organized as projects and primarily serve to launch a communicative process. Later on, I will address the key question of how to deal with the results of this process and whether they actually have an impact on political and administrative decisions.

Since exploring each individual method would go beyond the scope of this article, we will at least examine their different characteristics.

Methods focus on:

- Balancing divergent interests (round tables, mediation, future search conferences)
- Advocating under-represented interests (advocacy planning, group advocates)
- Promoting community work (community organizing, planning for real)
- Developing creativity and skills (future search workshop, Open Space)
- Involving special target groups
- Enhancing representative participation among the general population (planning cells/citizens' reports)

Problems

Citizen participation entails a range of problems that can only be partially solved using the above-mentioned methods. Establishing an ongoing dialogue is presumably one of the issues that have to be solved.

- Traditional citizen participation is often superficial. There are hearings and approaches designed to obtain input and feedback from citizens, however, it is often unclear how this information is implemented in decisions.
Another example of this lack of transparency: when citizens are given the floor at a meeting, only very few people are actually allowed to speak. A town meeting attended by 100 people would have to last over 8 hours in order for each participant to be able to speak for just 5 minutes.
- Many forms of participation are selective and only address certain segments of the population, leaving out entire groups such as children, youth, migrants, women, and people with disabilities. Highly educated, articulate individuals with plenty of time on their hands tend to dominate the process.
- Involvement and participation require time – time to acquire information, time to attend meetings, etc.
- Timing is frequently problematic. People only get interested and involved in an issue when they are directly affected by it. But opportunities for citizen participation are often available too early, at a point in time when people are not yet affected by an issue. At the other end of the scale, by the time people realize that they are affected by an issue, they often have very few remaining options to exert their influence. This leads to an "information paradox", as illustrated below:

[Grafik]

[hoch] high

[niedrig] low

[Möglichkeiten der Einflussnahme] Opportunities to exert influence

[Engagement und Interesse] Involvement and interest

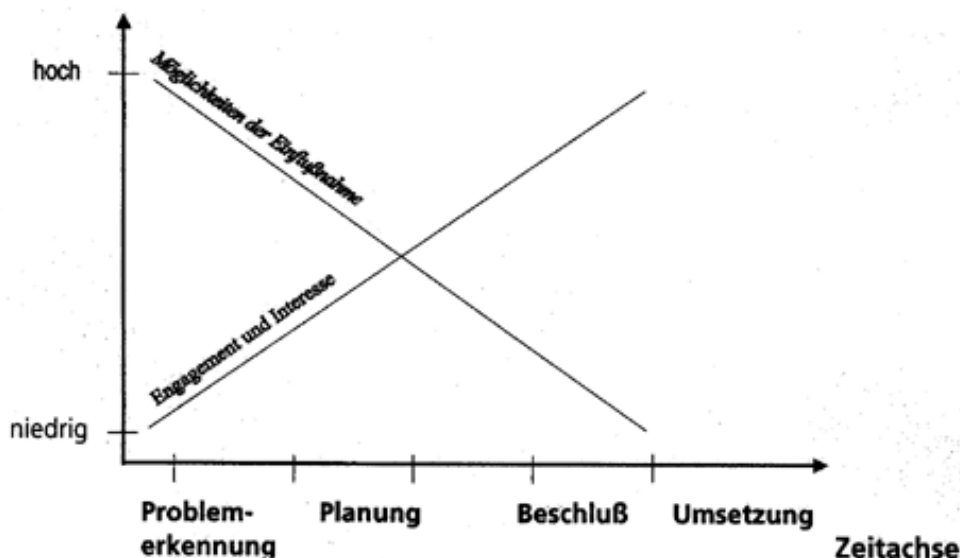
[Problemerkennung] Problem recognition

[Planung] Planning

[Beschuß] Decision

[Umsetzung] Implementation

[Zeitachse] Time scale



- Finally, Reinert addresses the problem of segmentation. In our society, there is a tendency for people to isolate themselves from other groups and seek to confirm their opinions rather than exchange ideas.

Conditions that enhance participation

The motivation to get involved and participate is enhanced by emphasizing:
a) concrete, carefully defined and delineated issues – despite, or within, the complexity of issues;

b) the temporary character of people's commitment: projects with a limited time frame are manageable;

- c) small, manageable groups where the value of each participant's involvement is clear;
- d) a social environment where critical media (TV, print media) provide reporting that represents various points of view.

Important criteria

Participation tends to succeed when the following criteria are taken into consideration or fulfilled:

- Openness concerning results – People's opinions and areas of expertise make a difference. The process goes far beyond just rubberstamping previous decisions, so it is important that political decision-makers are willing to take risks.
- Skills – The information and expertise required to assess the consequences and secondary effects of various options need to be made clear and understandable. Concrete participation procedures also require well thought out concepts, preparation and implementation.
- Transparency – Right from the beginning, it should be clear who will be affected by the results of the participation process, and how these people will be affected.
- Efficiency and effectiveness – The rewards of participating should compensate for the individual efforts required. Results of decision-making processes should lead to real decisions.

Participation and citizen involvement

Citizen participation and citizen involvement are closely intertwined. It goes without saying that if you are called upon to help shape a process, you also want to participate in decisions. And if you participate in a decision, you are more likely to get involved in a topic, an issue, or a problem.

In this sense, participation is both a form of involvement and an essential prerequisite for greater involvement.

When it comes to citizen involvement, the well-coordinated and appropriate use of volunteer work (volunteer management) has become increasingly important. A key element here is the development of an approach that emphasizes recognition. Volunteer work is another area where people are rewarded for their involvement with an opportunity to participate. They show initiative, have a say, and participate in decisions.

Berthold Brecht:

"It is the very nature of democracy, and it only stands to reason, that people want to be able to plan and shape the house in which they are going to live."

The contribution of the civil society concept to the debate on sustainability

In summary, we can draw the following conclusion: In addition to the market and the world of politics, there is a realm that guarantees citizens the opportunity to take part in the structures in which they live. This opportunity is not a firmly established entity, but rather a phenomenon that is in constant flux, with varying degrees of scope. We could call it civil society or civic society. In addition to a wide range of instruments and methods at its disposal, it is subject to restrictions. Debates over civil society can, at

best, point to the limits of academic research, but they can never replace it. Civil society can participate in decisions, but it cannot marginalize state authorities or take their place.

It should be clear that a debate on sustainability is pointless if it has not been "sustainably" integrated into civil society. A variety of approaches are required for this process of integration to succeed. At the same time, it is important to remember that civil societies cannot be forced to follow a specific agenda.

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A Guide to Civil Society in Germany

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