

CETRA²⁰¹⁴

3rd International Conference on Road and Rail Infrastructure
28–30 April 2014, Split, Croatia

Road and Rail Infrastructure III

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION FOR SUCCESSFUL TRAFFIC AND TRANSPORT PLANNING

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Abstract

In planning and building transportation infrastructure, citizens are increasingly demanding more information and rights of participation. This contribution for CETRA 2014 illustrates the state of the art of public participation in Germany and shows why participation makes sense, who should take part in the process of planning, at which point, and the methods that should be used. The aim of public participation is to improve the involvement of citizens in planning. It is important to increase the appreciation of citizenship, politicians and administration for each others' concerns and duties. For traffic and transport planners, it is useful to get ideas and proposals from experts of 'everyday life'. Experience shows, that public participation positively influences the planning process and improves the level of acceptance for planning projects. For the procedure of participation, the following three target groups have been identified, each with a different role and professional competence: institutional stakeholders (administration, parliamentary groups etc.), citizen and lobby groups (citizens' action groups, lobbies etc.) and the general public (people living in the planning area and other concerned persons). The different forms of participation have to address the interests and capabilities of the different groups. The simplest way of participation is the transmission of information to the citizens and the exploration of their interests and opinions. In both cases communication only runs in one direction: from planner to citizen or vice versa. In more intensive forms of participation a two-way exchange occurs. The most intensive type of participation is one where co-operation takes place, where citizens and professionals work together. During the last few years different methods of public participation have been developed. In present-day Germany citizen forums and workshops are wide-spread. For concrete tasks of urban planning, 'planning factories' have been used. Participation via electronic communication media is quickly gaining in importance.

Keywords: publicity, traffic planners, citizen, policy, public participation, communication, mediation, media, e-participation

1 Introduction

Public attitude concerning the build of new road and railways has changed in the last decades. Many citizens judge large building projects critically and are protesting against them. The motivations for such protests are versatile:

- disapproval of the building of transportation infrastructure in one's neighbourhood;
- environmental and social concerns: protection of natural and cultural assets;
- discontent with traffic policies that support highspeed railways and highways;
- desire to use public funds for other purposes;
- suspicion of federal plans and projects;
- disapproval of an enforcement related policy – and planning style.

Citizen protests frequently result in project delays due to changes in procedures and prosecution on the one hand. On the other hand the protests divide the people and the politicians. In the time period between 2009 to 2011 the German project “Stuttgart 21” has attracted a high level of public attention. The existing above-ground, dead end main station in the middle of the major city Stuttgart (approx. 600.000 citizens) is supposed to be replaced with an underground railway station. Ever since the unveiling of the plans, a sizeable alliance consisting of citizens and NGOs have protested vehemently against the project [1]. As a result “Stuttgart 21” has become a highly sensitive issue in German domestic policy.

The protests against “Stuttgart 21” have, in affect, forced the academic and policymaking world to take a hard look at public participation, resulting in several publications with policy recommendations. Examples are the “guide for a proper public participation” from the Federal Ministry of Transportation [2] and the social science-based publication “in-time public participation for efficient traffic infrastructure planning” [3].

This paper illustrates the state of the art of public participation in Germany. The article explains why public participation is necessary and who should be engaged to apply the correct method in the appropriate time frame. This paper relies on an article entitled “advice for participation and cooperation in traffic planning” [4], published by the FGSV (German Road and Traffic Research Association), and written by this author, who is also a member of the relevant task force.

2 Goals of public participation

Major goals of public participation are in fact:

- Strengthening of participation and transparency: plans should not be made “on the sly” behind citizens backs.
- Encouragement and understanding between citizens, policy makers and administration of the relevant concerns or tasks: knowledge of the motives of other parties reinforces acceptance.
- Applying ideas and proposals based on the view of the user (knowledge acquired from daily life) makes fieldwork easier for the planner.
- Positive influence on planning process and preparation of social and political acceptance: experiences show that public participation leads to an improved understanding and a higher level of acceptance of the project.

To achieve these aims some requirements have to be considered. One important fact is that the “rules of the game” are clearly defined to the citizens. For instance, it must be clarified that the public only has advisory function. All decisions concerning the project are finally made by the democratic elected parliament. Continued participation at early stage is also very important: helpful suggestions of citizens can only be considered properly in the early course of project. If citizens are informed of plans after they have been finalized, resistance is practically inevitable . Furthermore, the different groups of society must be addressed and involved in the participation. Based on past experiences, women, children and adolescents, employees and migrants are mostly underrepresented. Therefore, these groups deserve special focus and participation procedures should be customized to meet their needs.

In conclusion, sufficient resources must be made available for the procedure of participation. Although participation may require financial resources, by taking the proper precautions, other financial expenses, such as legal expenses from lawsuits, can be avoided.

3 Stakeholders in public participation

There are three different groups of addressees who differ from each other in their role and expertise (Figure 1).

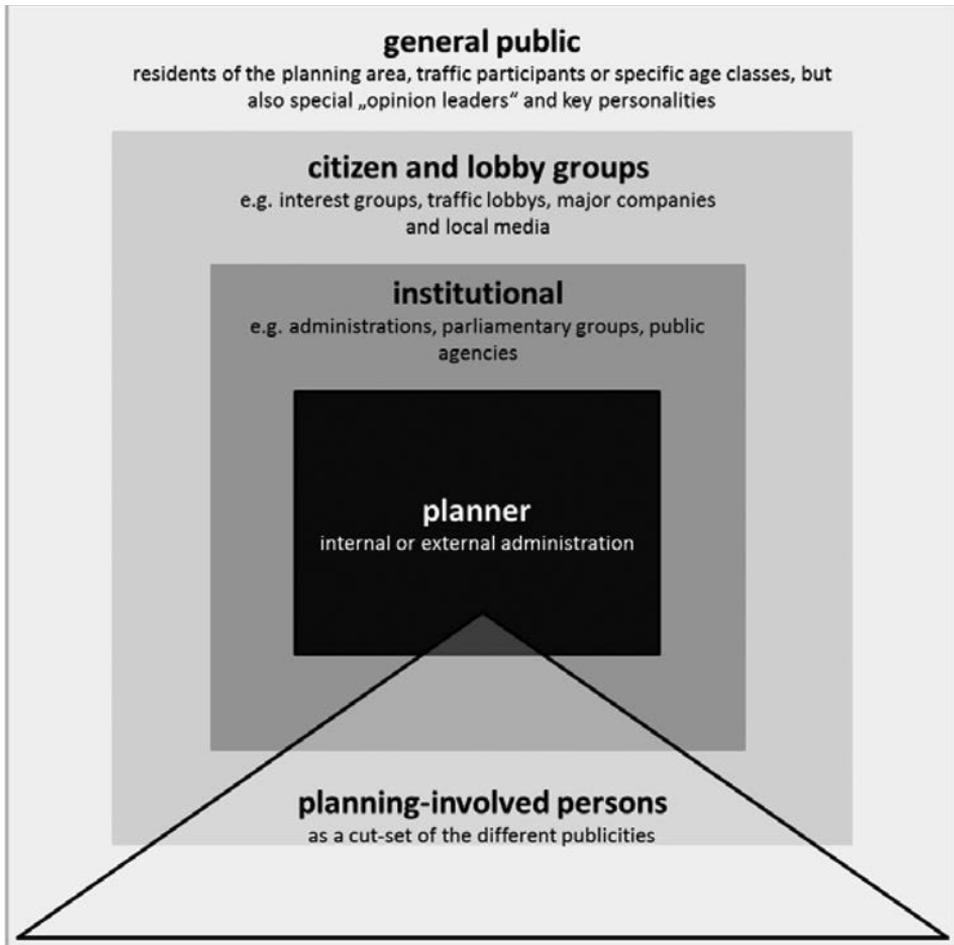


Figure 1 Public in traffic planning [4]

3.1 Institutional

Agencies, administrations and political committees belong to the institutional stakeholders. They are traditionally embedded in the planning process and deal with professional traffic planning tasks.

3.2 Citizen and lobby groups

Citizens and lobby groups can be summarized as organized groups. Mostly, they consist of voluntary representatives. Although they consist predominantly of laymen, many citizens' initiatives have developed excellent expertise.

3.3 General public

General public includes both, residents as well as further interested and concerned persons. They consist predominantly of volunteers. This has to be considered by using a common, coherent type of language and presentation.

4 Different types of public participation

The different types of participation have to cover the interests and options of the different groups. The basic purpose of participation is first, to elicit information and opinions from citizens, and second, to inform citizens about the current status of a planning project. In both instances the communication channel runs in one direction, from planners to citizens or vice versa. The purpose of gathering information and opinions is to understand attitudes, evaluate the level of knowledge and the behaviour of citizens. Thus, hints to conflicts and potential cooperation in planning can be extracted, especially at the beginning stages of planning. Informing citizens is important for imparting the goals and contents of planning and gives citizens the opportunity to form their own opinions. Accordingly, it is fundamental to communicate which parts of the planning process are only loose ideas and which are already concrete determinations – in every stage of planning.

During public participation sessions, an exchange takes place between planners and citizens. By expressing their demands and opinions in hearings or assuming the role of a planner in task forces, they take an active part in the planning process.

The most intensive type of participation is a cooperation, where professionals and laymen work together to solve problems. Intensive communication, working towards a common denominator and compromises are the significant attributes of this type of participation.

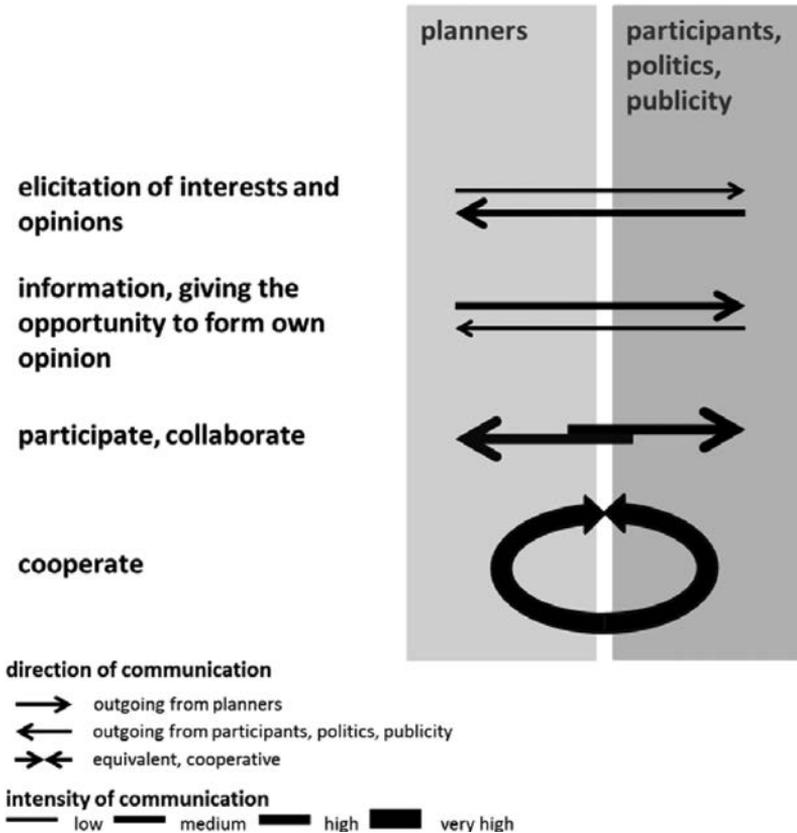


Figure 2 Different participation and cooperation types [4]

New types of participation and cooperation will evolve with the expansion of the internet and modern media. On the one hand these new technologies increase the possibilities for reaching the general public and eliciting feedback. On the other hand there are risks associated with the speed and ease at which information is transmitted. For instance, these new communication forms are so dynamic that it is becoming more difficult to prevent the spreading of false information.

5 Techniques of public participation

During the past few years, many different techniques for participation have developed, which are suitable for various types of participation at different planning stages. Citizen surveys are very useful for eliciting opinions, especially at the beginning stages of planning. Quantitative methods in form of questionnaires as well as qualitative surveys (interviews with individuals or groups) are useful in this regard. In several cities complaint management systems have been implemented, the results of which provide important feedback for future planning.

For information and opinion making, different types of media can be used: websites, newspapers, flyers for households, posters, exhibitions and so on. Open councils allow planners to go into greater detail with their plans and to address emerging questions from citizens. Excursions through the city can be very helpful as well, because plans can be explained better while on location. In contrast to using maps, excursions give citizens a real-life example of completed projects.

As far as types of participation, citizen forums and citizen workshops are the most prevalent in Germany. Together, citizens and experts discuss plans to develop their own solutions. A new possibility of participation is e-participation. In chats and newsgroups citizens are able to evaluate solutions, to communicate their ideas and comment on suggestions of others. One example of this is the online participation in the transport development plan of Bremen [5]. Further types of participation are roundtables as well as mediations. Their main goal is finding solutions for existing and foreseeable conflicts in planning.

6 Conclusion

Public participation is an important part of traffic planning processes and is gaining increasing influence. Awareness about the importance of public participation is prevalent in Germany. In a current survey, for example, the Federal Association of German Industry and other marketing associations advance the view of a proper and comprehensible information of the citizen about projects. They also recommend an intensive participation at earlier stages of planning [6]. In recent strategic traffic development planning (“sustainable urban mobility plans” (SUMP)), continuous public participation plays a major role [7].

Recent experiences have shown that public participation is not a universal remedy that solves contentious conflicts. For example, in conflicts involving conservation areas or private property, a solution might involve more than public participation. Nonetheless, public participation can help to work towards a concrete solution. Public participation can increase the acceptance of transportation planning projects, which in turn can improve the final outcome of project. For successful public participation, transportation planners will have to improve their skills at preparing and implementing public participation sessions. Assistance from professional moderators might be necessary as well.

In summary, public participation is an expression of culture. It describes the process of interaction between state and citizen. Correspondingly, the experiences made in Germany cannot be identically adapted to other countries. An international exchange of experiences and best practices can help to accelerate the learning process for all stakeholders.

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