

RIFS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

Organizing Local Citizens' Councils: Handbook Shows How It's Done

The new handbook "Organizing municipal citizens' councils" was recently published. RIFS is co-editor of the work, together with Mehr Demokratie e.V. and the Institute for Democracy and Participation Research (IDPF) in Wuppertal. The handbook is aimed at practitioners in the field of public participation and offers valuable insights and advice on the initiation, planning and successful implementation of citizens' assemblies at the municipal level.

Research into democratic participation processes has played a prominent role at the RIFS for several years now, with multiple research groups and numerous projects bundled together in a research area on "[Democracy and Sustainability](#)", which explores various issues relating to the future of democracy. This research is in demand – after all, HOW we tackle the decisions that we have to make in a democratic society will be crucial to the unfolding of the transformation towards sustainability – and for citizens, civil society organisations and economic actors engaging with politicians and government bodies and agencies.

[Citizens' assemblies and other modern participation processes](#) can play an important role here, as they offer advantages on both fronts by creating opportunities for participation that go beyond simply seeking the public's approval or rejection. This is particularly important at the municipal level, where public participation can feed the knowledge of local, non-organized citizens into political processes, helping to resolve political deadlocks and overcome conflicts driven by wrangling over political power.

The handbook's publication follows the widespread trialling of citizens' assemblies in cities throughout Germany in recent years, which has generated a wealth of experience and knowledge. Titled "Organizing municipal citizens' councils", the handbook will benefit

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diverse practitioners, including mayors, city and municipal councillors, process facilitators, administrative staff and citizens' initiatives.

It is important to note that the handbook is much more than just a how-to guide. The authors emphasise that no two participation processes are (or should be) the same. Practitioners can choose from the wide variety of participation formats now available and should tailor participation towards its purpose, rather than the other way around. The specific issue addressed in a process and its broader context should determine how a citizens' assembly is designed and implemented. Instead of providing an off-the-shelf solution, the handbook presents a variety of options and components that can be used to develop a citizens' assembly process. For users, the challenge lies in choosing the right option – and in critically assessing whether a citizens' assembly is the right choice at all.

It is also important to note that the while citizens' assemblies can deliver broader benefits such as "strengthening democracy" and “boosting the acceptance of representative democracy and its decisions” – this is by no means always the case and it would be ill-advised to hold a citizens' assembly with only these goals in mind. Instead, citizens' assemblies should be used by mayors and local authorities to tackle significant and pressing issues by drawing on the knowledge in communities and engaging with the views of non-organized citizens. These ‘side effects’ only occur where public participation makes a tangible contribution to addressing such challenges.

The handbook "Organizing municipal citizens' councils" is full of inspiration and ideas and provides excellent guidance in the fast-moving field of dialogue-focused public participation and will hopefully be a useful aid in the development of public participation processes across the country!

The handbook (in German) features a number of examples from the [LOS LAND](#) project, in which researchers from the RIFS worked with Mehr Demokratie e.V. to support ten municipalities across Germany in developing and implementing tailor-made participation processes. Following the conclusion of the project's pilot funding phases by the Federal Agency for Civic Education, RIFS will take over the management of the LOS LAND project. RIFS researcher [Victoria Luh](#) will lead the project at RIFS from 1 February 2024.



1. Planungsphase

Zu Beginn wird eine Steuerungsgruppe aus der Kommune zusammengestellt. Diese erarbeitet gemeinsam mit dem LOSLAND Team Format und Fragestellung für die Beteiligungsveranstaltung(en) und plant deren Umsetzung.



2. Zukunftsrat

Dies ist das Herzstück des Prozesses. Die beteiligten Bürgerinnen und Bürger beratschlagen sich zur Frage nach einer enkeltauglichen Zukunft für die Kommune und entwickeln mit Hilfe eines professionellen Moderationsteams Empfehlungen für die Politik.

Losland phases 1 and 2: from the planning phase to the Future Council. losland.org



3. Zukunftsforum

In einer öffentlichen Veranstaltung werden die Ergebnisse des Zukunftsrats vorgestellt. In lockerer Atmosphäre bekommen alle Bürgerinnen und Bürger der Kommune die Möglichkeit, die Ergebnisse zu diskutieren und durch ihre eigenen Gedanken anzureichern.



4. Transfer

Im letzten Schritt beschäftigt sich die Steuerungsgruppe mit der Frage, wie die Ergebnisse der Beteiligungsveranstaltungen in die Entscheidungen der Politik einfließen sollen. Der Gemeinderat veröffentlicht eine Erklärung und gibt Auskunft, welche neuen Projekte angeschoben und welche Ideen weiterverfolgt werden können.

Losland phases 3 and 4: from Future Forum to transfer. losland.org

