

RIFS-Blogpost

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The LOSLAND project showed how public dialogue and participation can promote democratic engagement and strengthen local politics.

Around the world, people want their local governments to be more accountable, more effective, and more participatory. Local

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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government can also play a key role in helping us shape the future in more intentional ways. Here in Germany, the **Losland** project worked with ten municipalities in different regions, all of which wanted to involve community members more actively in designing the future of their communities. Even though local circumstances varied across sites, we learned that it works quite well to engage randomly-selected citizens in addressing specific issues and co-designing desired futures. According to Daniel Oppold, RIFS researcher for this project, “One good thing was that we showed this process works in both smaller and larger places; it works in Western Germany and in Eastern Germany.”

Here at RIFS, we are celebrating that the **Losland** report is now available in English. This attractively illustrated compendium of “experiences, reflections, and recommendations for action” was designed to be accessible to lay practitioners, local administrators, and community members alike, and is [available for download here](#). This kind of knowledge-sharing matters! While your local circumstances will undoubtedly differ in many ways, what we’ve learned from working with municipalities throughout Germany can offer both inspiration and practical insights for others doing parallel work.

The value of public dialogue and participation for promoting democratic engagement and strengthening local politics has been a frequent research topic here at RIFS, [as explored in an earlier blog post](#) by Dr. David Löw-Beer and Daniel Oppold. While national and transnational governments can create helpful legislation, policies, and incentives at a higher level, much needs to be initiated and carried out at the local level in order to co-create effective sustainability transitions. Whatever sector we are working in – food, energy, transportation, land use, etc. – local government needs to



be involved. This means that helping local governments collaborate more effectively with community members through a variety of participatory approaches is a key part of the mix.

Here at RIFS, a variety of projects focus on different aspects of local and regional transformation. Here's a small sampling:

- **Agriculture:** a current RIFS project studying community supported agriculture, led by Prof. Dr. Katharina Beyerl.
- **Energy:** The “Democratic Governance and Agency” group, led by Dr. David Löw-Beer and Dr. Franziska Mey, has worked on many projects with a local focus, including regional sustainability transformations. These include citizen science for developing community energy systems in former coal-mining regions, as well as community energy projects and a project on regional planning for heat storage. In addition, they have been doing research on the effects of public participation efforts on local and regional energy projects.
- **Transportation:** One recent RIFS project, led by Research Associate Immo Janssen, has focused on the community-building and climate adaptation potential of Kiezblocks (or “Super Blocks”), which alter established transportation patterns to support greater multi-purpose uses. Previously, RIFS has worked with other organizations on exploring mobility transformations in Berlin.
- **Local culture projects:** a RIFS project on the experiences of cultural and artistic social enterprises at a local level led by Dr. Rebecca Froese; another project on cultural heritage



and climate adaptation in selected coastal cities led by Research Associate Teresa Erbach.

- **Coordinating systemic risk responses at a regional level:** Dr. Pia-Johanna Schweizer leads the Systemic Risks group; one of their projects supports four regional real-world labs designed to coordinate preparation for and responses to systemic risks in different regions of Europe.

While these distinct projects are organised separately, some current Fellows whose work also focuses at the local level are interested in hosting learning exchanges between them. This is a particular interest for Senior Fellow Cléo Mieulet, a community organiser, degrowth advocate, and resilience specialist focused on community-based solutions to address social inequality and support local transformations. As a start, we want to recognise and celebrate the variety of RIFS projects that support sustainability transformations at local and regional levels.

1.1 Back to Losland

One significant source of inspiration for the Losland project was the many local and state-level Citizens' Councils that began taking place in Vorarlberg, Austria, in 2006. These Austrian Citizens' Councils have been institutionalised since 2013 in the Vorarlberg State Constitution, and were recognised in 2020 as one of twelve "best-practice" models in an OECD report on democratic innovations.

Patrizia Nanz, then Scientific Director at IASS (now RIFS), was an early thought-leader for the Losland project. She is very familiar with the Citizens' Councils in Austria; two of her books — "Reconstructing Democracy: How Citizens Are Building from the Ground Up", co-authored with Charles Taylor and Madeleine



Beaubien Taylor, and “No Representation Without Consultation: A Citizen's Guide to Participatory Democracy”, co-authored with Claus Leggewie —include examples from Austria.

The initial idea for **Losland** was generated in conversations between Patrizia Nanz and political journalist Marie von Mallinckrodt. To gain deeper insights into how democracy can be lived and practised in the 21st century, Nanz and von Mallinckrodt spent a year hosting workshops in Germany with diverse participants, including mayors, members of the Bundestag and the European Parliament, administrative staff from various ministries, journalists, and stakeholders from civil society. Subsequently, in conversations with Roman Huber, Managing Director of Mehr Demokratie (More Democracy), the plan was forged for the **Losland** project to become a partnership between Mehr Demokratie e.V. and IASS (now RIFS). Roman Huber is a co-initiator and organiser of the first two nationwide Citizens' Assemblies in Germany.

Prior to arriving at RIFS as a Senior Fellow in September 2024, I conducted doctoral research on the Vorarlberg Councils. Since then I have published a peer-reviewed article, “Listening Across Differences”, drawing on that work. While not directly involved with the Losland project, I have been inspired by it for many reasons, including its connection with the Austrian Citizens' Councils.

Given how much we need sustainability transformations at the local level, I am delighted to share the learnings from **Losland** with other communities worldwide interested in local democratic innovations. Please download this vibrant English-language report and share it with anyone who may find it useful!



P.S. If you are interested in learning more, check out the **Losland** website. While only a small part of that site is available in English, the rest is easily accessible through Google Translate.