

Participatory governance in planning processes: How do public administrations learn?

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The necessity of strong public participation in planning processes of public authorities has been generally recognized in recent years. It is an area in which public authorities are still undergoing a learning process, since best practice knowledge on shaping and implementing participatory processes is scarce. A study led by the Lueneburg political scientist Professor Jens Newig showed how these learning processes take place at the level of German federal states. The results demonstrate that, in most cases, public administrators resort to past experiences in their own federal state. The adoption of best practice from other federal states or the conducting of experiments are rare. It is here, however, that researchers see great potential. The findings of the study have been published in the journal *Environmental Science & Policy*.

At the centre of the study is the implementation of the EU Floods Directive by the German federal states. The researchers investigated how local authorities implemented the participatory requirements imposed under the Directive at federal level and which experiences, examples and methods they drew on. In order to do so, they analysed reports, brochures and official websites concerned with participatory planning in the implementation of the EU Floods Directive in eleven federal states and conducted interviews with high-ranking representatives from the state environmental ministries and agencies.

The results show that the majority of public administrations in the

federal states resort to experiences made with participatory processes within their own state. Doing so, experience from previous planning cycles within the same policy area is built upon in order to more effectively shape later planning cycles. Another way of gathering knowledge and optimizing processes is to draw from experience with participatory planning in adjacent policy areas in the same state. The implementation of pilot projects and controlled experiments, however, is of only peripheral importance.

The exchange of experience with other federal states and knowledge and practice transfers resulting therefrom have played a minor role so far. Conversely, the involvement of external players, such as researchers and consultancies specializing in the field of public participation has frequently been observed. More than half of the states reported to be working with such an external expert. Respondents saw it nonetheless as problematic that the concepts and procedures developed by external partners were often too general or fragmented and that the authorities' specific concerns were given insufficient consideration.

"Our study shows that the administration is not fully utilizing existing learning potential from participatory procedures in flood control," said Professor Newig. "It would make sense, in our view, if public administrators developed a greater awareness of the importance of learning processes and systematically integrated learning aspects into their actions, especially with respect to the design of participatory processes. Existing participatory procedures of individual federal states could benefit from intensified experience and skills exchanges between each other and from greater involvement of external expertise. The authorities could also gain important insights into the effectiveness of individual participation formats from controlled experiments - far more common in other countries like the US or the Netherlands - and thus further optimize their processes".

More information: Jens Newig et al, Exploring governance learning: How policymakers draw on evidence, experience and intuition in designing participatory flood risk planning, *Environmental Science & Policy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2015.07.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2015.07.020)

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