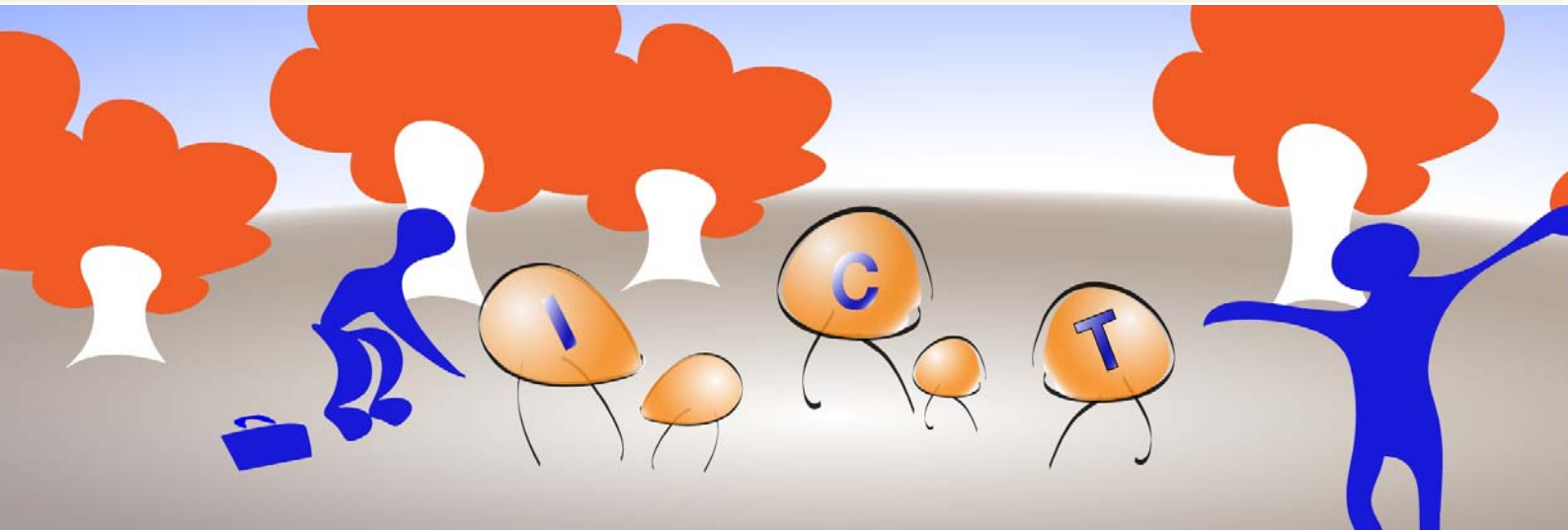


N° 7 • March 2009

eParticipation



Editorial

eParticipation.....	2
Jeremy Millard	

Articles

Contextualising Public (e)Participation in the Governance of the European Union.....	4
Simon Smith and Efraxia Dalakiouridou	
eParticipation initiatives: How is Europe progressing?.....	15
Eleni Panopoulou, Efthimios Tambouris and Konstantinos Tarabanis	
Evaluating eParticipation Projects: Practical Examples and Outline of an Evaluation Framework.....	27
Georg Aichholzer and Hilmar Westholm	
E-consultations: New tools for civic engagement or facades for political correctness?.....	45
Jordanka Tomkova	
Beyond Theory: e-Participatory Budgeting and its Promises for eParticipation.....	55
Tiago Peixoto	
Family Policies – A Promising Field of eParticipation	64
Birgit Hohberg, Maren Lübcke and Rolf Lührs	
The e-participation project of Neuchâtel.....	73
Gerard Cervelló	
Usability Engineering in eParticipation.....	79
Sabrina Scherer, Evika Karamagioli, Manuela Titorencu, Johanna Schepers, Maria A. Wimmer and Vasilis Koulolias	



The European Journal of ePractice is a digital publication on eTransformation by ePractice.eu, a portal created by the European Commission to promote the sharing of good practices in eGovernment, eHealth and eInclusion.

Edited by P.A.U. Education, S.L.

Web: www.epracticejournal.eu

Email: editorial@epractice.eu



The texts published in this journal, unless otherwise indicated, are subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivativeWorks 2.5 licence. They may be copied, distributed and broadcast provided that the author and the e-journal that publishes them, European Journal of ePractice, are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted on creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/

Family Policies – A Promising Field of eParticipation

Three cities in Germany – Hamburg, Berlin and Munich – have opened up a new field for eParticipation. They initiated a dialogue on the Internet to ask their citizens what family-friendly living in each of the cities should look like. All three discourses – conducted between November 2005 and November 2008 – provide comparable and interesting results on four aspects: context, course, clients and results.

One of the most promising results of all three debates is that the issue attracts a user group which is not a majority in political discussions. The discussions in Hamburg, Munich and in Berlin were able to motivate female participants in particular to have their say and to dominate the discourse. This is an encouraging result for politics and eParticipation in general. Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the political process. By addressing this topic, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin have taken a big step forward in the field of eParticipation.

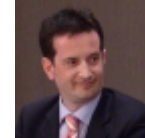
As a result, it is to be expected that other European cities and municipalities will take up this topic, not only to promote eParticipation but also to help politicians harness expert local knowledge in the interests of successful and sustainable family policy.



Birgit Hohberg



Maren Lübcke



Rolf Lührs

TuTech Innovation GmbH

Keywords

e-participation, demos, e-democracy, moderated online discourses, family discourses, family friendly living

“ Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the traditional political process. ”

1 Introduction

The ageing population in Europe is one of the biggest challenges European societies will have to face in the forthcoming decades. Higher life expectancy coupled with a decrease in birth rates will change life in Europe tremendously and challenge the economic, political and social basis of municipalities and cities alike. Cities and municipalities will have to compete for inhabitants – and are indeed already doing so. For cities, young families are a target group of special interest. By establishing a family-friendly policy, cities could dissuade young families from moving out of town and encourage them to settle down in the city itself.

But what does family friendliness mean? What is important for families? How do they want to live and how do their ideas match the current situation in their city? Where is there room for improvement and which problems have to be solved?

Answers to questions like these by members of the public yield interesting information for a city's future policy and are an important part of active public participation. Converting this kind of participation into eParticipation adds value to the process. Hurdles are much lower, since families are free to participate whenever and wherever they choose without the effort of integrating participation into their family's schedule. However, this topic seems untypical of eParticipation approaches, which usually address urban planning or political issues and attract more men than women.

Three big cities in Germany decided to meet this challenge: Berlin, Hamburg and Munich opened a dialogue on the Internet to ask their citizens what family-friendly living in each of the cities should look like. Conducted between November 2005 and November 2008 and using the same technical basis and discourse methodology in each city, these three examples of eParticipation provide comparable and interesting results. In the following article we will provide a description of the three online discourses by comparing four aspects: (2) context, (3) course, (4) participants and (5) results in each of the discussions.

2 Context

Berlin, Hamburg and Munich are the three biggest cities in Germany, located in the north (Hamburg), south (Munich) and central eastern region (Berlin).

The first to attempt this Internet-based family involvement was Hamburg, where in 2003 the public administration was looking for a new topic to link with its first online consultation on its guiding principle for the future: "Metropolitan Hamburg – Growing City" (see Lührs, R., et al., 2003). During this time the government's family policy was criticised in public and in the media. The senate – led by the Christian Democratic Party – claimed in its political guiding principle for Hamburg to want to make the city more attractive to families. At the same time as this aim was stated, the senate agreed several reforms which led to an increased financial burden, especially on families. Such contradictory policy provoked negative criticism and probably explains why the senate actively chose the topic of family friendliness to initiate a new city-wide online discussion. In long and intense discussions with selected administrative bodies, the relationship between family and living was chosen as a topic suitable for an Internet discussion with the public, experts and politicians. The online discussion in Hamburg (available under <http://www.familienleben-hamburg.de/>) started on 17 October 2005 and ended four weeks later on 12 November following almost a year of conceptualisation and preparation.

In preparation for the discussion, representatives of all seven districts and the authorities involved came together with members of TuTech Innovation GmbH who were in charge of the project's realisation and facilitation. Scientific advice was given by the IES (Institut für Entwicklungsplanung und Strukturforschung), a private institute of the University of Hannover. The key task of these round table talks was the development of a common understanding about procedures and goals. The district representatives were especially interested in how families' needs related to certain residential areas. Thus families were seen as experts on their home districts and the local context of the discussion was interpreted as one of the most interesting and promising aspects. Finally, the discussion led to guidelines for a family-friendly city of Hamburg being drawn up by citizens and published and presented to the interested public, authorities and the senate.

In the end, Hamburg's family discourse inspired Munich and Berlin to follow this example of actively involving their citizens in the development of family policies.

In Munich, the Bavarian capital, the city council set about developing a new guideline for family and child policy in 2004 to improve quality of life. The guideline was passed by the city's council after an intensive phase of public hearings and interaction with different social participants such as companies, churches, associations and the families themselves between March and October 2006. During this period, a number of information days for

experts in this area were announced, followed by a phase for the general public. The online discourse was part of this public phase (together with additional information days) and the results of the debate as well as of the other offline events were integrated into the “1. Münchner Kinder- und Familienforum” (First children’s and family forum of Munich) in October 2006, which led to a revised version of the guideline for family and child policy.

In 2008 the “Berliner Beirat für Familienfragen” (Berlin’s Advisory Board on Family Issues) announced a tender to run an online discussion about family friendliness in Berlin based on the model of the Hamburg discourse. The “Berliner Beirat” has 23 members from the fields of politics, science, economy, churches and associations. The counsellors’ tasks include the following:

- providing consultation to the senate regarding issues of family policy
- providing new impulses to the senate for family policy measures
- public relations
- providing consultation for regional initiatives and
- compiling the next family report for Berlin

Family reports are an established tool in the Federal Republic of Germany available for each of the three administrative tiers (state, Land, municipality). In general, they should fulfil three purposes: 1) to inform the public about the families’ situation, 2) to inform politics and administration about needs for action and 3) to evaluate socio-political measures. The current report has to be finalised by 2010 and data is collected during the whole parliamentary term. The report will focus on the parties concerned, based on dialogue with families themselves and representatives of family-related associations and organisations. The DEMOS discourse “Living Together in Berlin” (available under <http://www.zusammen-leben-in-berlin.de>) is an integral part of the forthcoming family report and its results will be presented in the final political document.

It is remarkable that in each of the three cases – and especially in Berlin and Munich – the results of the online debate were part of a larger political initiative. In all three cities a strong political will supported the conduct of the discourses, and the administrations’ interest in the public’s local knowledge was clearly communicated and not questioned by the participants.

3 Course

The discourses in Berlin and Munich were inspired by the first debate in Hamburg. All of them were conducted by TuTech Innovation GmbH using the DEMOS concept and technology for facilitation (see Lührs, R., et al. 2003). But of course the five years between the first and the latest online debate led to important improvements to the technical platform, especially with regard to so-called Web 2.0 features such as wikis. Nevertheless, all three discussions were structured according to the three-phase model (broadening, deepening, consolidation) of the underlying DEMOS participation methodology, but each was adapted to take account of individual frameworks and conditions.

In the first phase in Hamburg, the public were invited to explain how they thought a family-friendly city and family-friendly living should look. A web form was integrated on the platform enabling participants to collect indicators for family friendliness. These indicators were aggregated into a checklist for the second phase. During the second phase, the list was used to discuss exemplary districts differing in terms of location and type of housing. These were pre-selected and presented with illustrative data and pictures and edited extensively. The discussion was further enriched by the online diary of two mothers with small children. Both writers had moved recently and described their daily life with children either in a central, urban district of Hamburg or at the rural periphery. Their reports specified advantages and disadvantages of both ways of life in an entertaining and attractive way, inspiring the forum’s discussions. Additionally, two well-known television presenters from Hamburg – both mothers – took part in live discussions on the platform. The third phase within the DEMOS process was used to pool the results of the second phase into a final discussion for consolidation. Results of this discussion have been compiled into the “Bürgerleitfaden für den familienfreundlichen Wohnort Hamburg” – “A Citizens’ Guideline for Family-friendly Living in Hamburg“. This manual includes a check-list for residential areas, illustrates family-friendly living using examples of different residential districts and provides information and advice for tenants, landlords, planners, politicians and administrations.

The discourse in Munich was structured in a similar way. In the first and broadening phase, members of the public were asked to identify and discuss the most important aspects of a child-friendly and family-friendly city and explain their priorities. The whole area of family policy was discussed and suggestions made. Based on these contributions, several thematic sub-forums were opened in the second phase. In contrast to the Hamburg

debate, the sub-forums were not pre-selected by the facilitators but rather chosen from the most important issues in phase 1, namely “Child Care and Education”, “Recreation and Play”, “Housing” and “Traffic”. The goal at this stage of the discourse was the development of concrete ideas for improvement, documented in wiki-like editable documents. Also nine theme days were offered on the platform where different experts from the municipality of Munich held consultation sessions. Each consultation lasted three hours and was related to a specific topic such as family and health, educational counselling, child care or housing. These discussions were perceived by the users as pleasant and helpful and the most suitable way of conducting a fruitful dialogue between citizens and government.

Also during the second phase, members of the public started to develop 36 concrete suggestions on family-related issues, covering a range of topics from pets to health. With these collaboratively developed proposals, participants helped to generate a condensed and usable overview of the discussion results. The third phase was used – again as in the Hamburg approach – to finalise the existing proposals and concept while at the same time finally evaluating and ranking them. With the help of the evaluation, the suggestions were placed in a hierarchy, mirroring the rating and the level of elaboration within the list. Heading this list was the suggestion for improved child care in Munich. Here some of the aspects mentioned show an in-depth knowledge of the local situation. For example, one or two districts with a very low level of kindergarten places were named together with cleared building plots owned by the municipality in suggestions to improve the situation.

The debate in Berlin combined elements of the two preceding discourses. The general topic still concentrated on family-friendly living, but was extended to include all kinds of cohabitation and social life. Thus information about the socio-demographic characteristics of Berlin was presented, including information on age clusters, families and on people from Berlin with an immigrant background. The first phase was used to collect topics to structure the second phase and to detect what were the important issues for family-friendly living in Berlin. Apart from the discussion forum, people were able to use a web form for proposals and describe briefly what in their opinion would help to improve family-friendliness in Berlin. Every participant with an account was able to vote for each of the suggestions in order to establish a ranking of the submitted proposals. The second phase was once again used to discuss certain issues more intensively in specified sub-forums. The topics for those thematic forums deduced from phase 1 were “Child Care and Education”, “Residential Areas and Traffic” “Recreation and Pleasure”. In addition to the sub-forums, the list of proposals was kept open and running, pending evaluation and augmentation. The facilitators of the discourse sought to synchronise the proposal list with the forum discussion by introducing the suggestions into the appropriate sub-forum. Discussion in every forum was continuously summarised and edited by topic in a total of 23 wikis.

As in Hamburg and in Munich, live discussions were also conducted in Berlin. The first of this kind reflected the special stance of the discourse in Berlin, with the migration psychologist Prof. Dr. Haci-Halil Uslucan addressing the users first, followed by Prof. Dr. Zöllner, senator for education, science and research, who discussed the future development of schools with the participants. Representatives of four different parties in Berlin’s parliament (and experts in the field of education and/or family issues) completed the live discussions in Berlin. The discussion with the senator attracted the biggest attention, followed by a lively discussion with invited members of the local parliament. Though the discussions lasted only one and a half hours, their effect continued to spread: one participant reported in the forum that she had made contact with Prof. Uslucan to continue work on certain issues.

4 Participants

In Hamburg 479 participants registered for the discourse, in Munich 321 and in Berlin 318. While in Hamburg and Munich each registered participant published nearly the same amount of contributions on average (4.6 and 4.8) the involvement of the public in Berlin was less than half (2.0 contributions on average per user).

	Registered users	Contributions
Hamburg	479	2192
Munich	321	1533
Berlin	318	635

Table 1: Participation rates in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin

If one looks at the number of registered users, the impression is ambivalent. The number of registered users might be comparably high for local participation projects, on the other hand it does not fulfil the early promise of eDemocracy when one takes into account that these online discussions were conducted in the three biggest cities in Germany.

Of interest is the question of the socio-demographical structure of the participating groups and whether they show similar characteristics or vary between the different cities.

First of all, the analysis of the data revealed that most of the participants in each of the discourses were female (Hamburg 62%:38%, Berlin 65%:35%, Munich 77%:23%). This result corresponds on the one hand with the underlying discussion topic, family-friendliness, which is still associated much more strongly with women than with men, but on the other it confirms the assumption that the proportion of women and men in Internet discourses depends much more on the issue under discussion than the medium itself. And nevertheless, male participants were not completely marginalised.

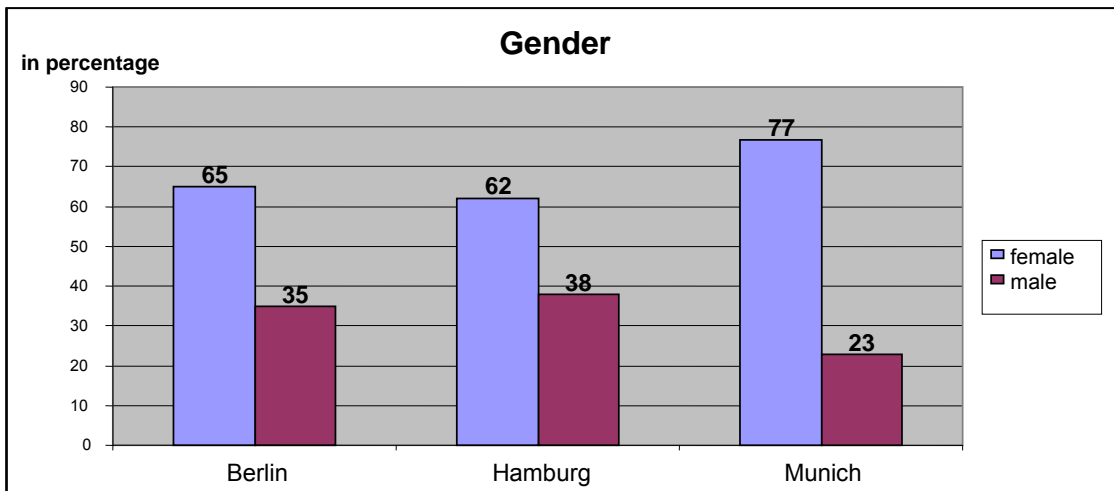


Figure 1: Distribution of sexes

Looking at the different age groups taking part in these discourses, we find another obvious similarity: the largest group in each of the cities is the one aged between 30 and 44, followed by those between 45 and 64, whereas all the other age groups (< 18, 18-24 and > 64) are underrepresented compared to the population as a whole. Correspondingly, most of the participants in Hamburg, Berlin and Munich said they had one (35 – 42%) or two children (31 – 39%). Bearing in mind that German women are on average 31 years old when their first children are born, all discourses attracted the central target group.

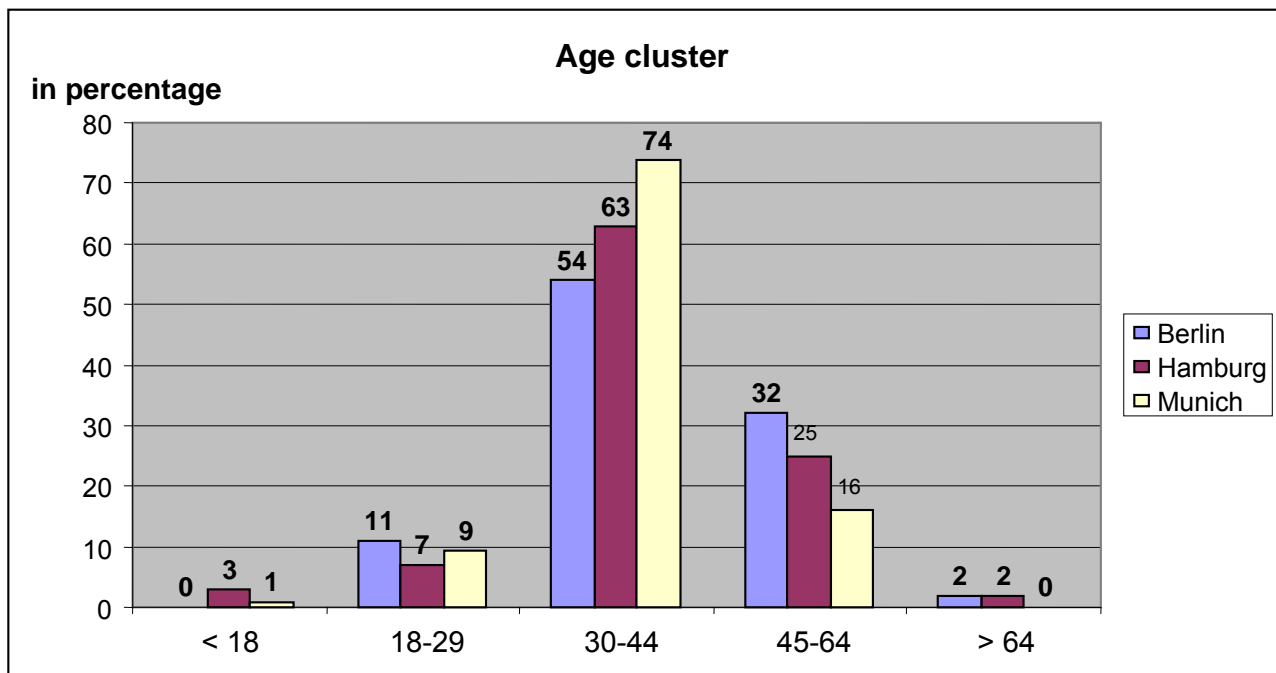


Figure 2: Distribution of age

As the level of education is usually very high in such online discourses, it is not surprising that the majority of participants in each of the cities had obtained at least a high school diploma or even completed higher education (between 74 and 85%), whereas only a few left school after gaining a secondary school leaving certificate (13 – 22%) or after completing secondary modern school (2 – 4%). As the German and British school systems differ significantly from one another, there is no comparable English term for the German “Hauptschule” (comprising nine school years in total). Hence we have called it secondary modern school, although the term generally encompasses many more potential school types and levels.

5 Results

Although the online debates enabled the participants to criticise local family policy, the tone and atmosphere of the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin were mainly friendly and constructive. However, the discussions differed in several points, ranging from the extent and type of participation to the problems mentioned.

In Hamburg, in the first phase of the discussion was used intensively by the participants to express their individual criticisms, for instance about the lack of affordable family housing and child care options, on the one hand, and more general political issues such as the senate’s plan to build huge projects like the philharmonic concert hall on the other. However, participants’ behaviour changed in the course of the second phase towards a collaborative development of ideas for improvements in different family-relevant areas. After having their critical say, the participants started to use all participation elements offered by the system and worked out improvement concepts and built up networks among themselves or with the moderators in order to find relevant solutions for the problems mentioned. Compared to Hamburg, the basic position in Munich was more affirmative towards urban family policy. This can be illustrated by comparing the number of contributions questioning the senate’s credibility regarding family policy in general, which was much higher in Hamburg than in Munich, where on the other hand the participation rate was lower than in Hamburg. Unlike in Hamburg and Berlin, the facilitators of Munich’s online discourse had initiated several online consultation hours with relevant experts from the administration to discuss the participants’ questions directly. This element in particular was appreciated by the users and might have caused this constant friendly atmosphere.

However, in Berlin the perception of the situation by families seemed to be even more favourable, judging by the low rate of critical contributions and the general discussion atmosphere. Nevertheless the facilitators did not succeed in attracting as many participants in the capital as in Hamburg. Even with a comprehensive promotion effort, it was not possible to convince a comparable mass of inhabitants to use this participation instrument.

With regard to the different discussion elements, it is worth mentioning that the participants in Munich used the possibility of augmenting and further developing the concepts in wikis, whereas the users in Berlin mostly ignored this opportunity. On the other hand, the inhabitants of the capital were much more attracted by the ranking mechanism (enabling them to rank different suggestions) than those of Munich, who mostly did not use this option to rate the different wikis.

In all three debates, the discussion on family policy and measurements was illustrated and enriched by using examples based on personal experience. Thus stereotyped and populist contributions were of no consequence for the discussions’ atmosphere in any of the three dialogues. The following paragraphs present a summary of the most important topics.

5.1 Affordable Living Space for Families

As one can imagine, living space that meets families’ needs is relatively expensive in big cities. Thus the issue was discussed in Hamburg as well as in Munich and showed that affordability means different things to different groups of citizens. Especially for single parents and families with several children and a below-average income, this issue is a big challenge. The pricing situation is most difficult in Munich, the city with the highest rents in Germany, whereas this issue was of nearly no interest in Berlin, one of the cheapest cities in Europe with a big public housing stock and an average rent half that of Munich’s. But in the end – also fostered by the underlying concept and title of the discussion – this aspect was discussed most extensively in Hamburg. Many participants demanded more affordable family-friendly flats or houses in the heart of the city while thinking aloud about possibly moving out of town instead. They also made a plea for more support for joint building ventures – a benchmark that has become very important in Hamburg today. Another group of people not normally heard also entered the online dialogue to have their say: single (female) parents built up a network on the platform expressing very clearly their specific needs and problems in getting suitable flats at affordable rents and with the kind of comprehensive infrastructure and sustainable, helpful neighbourhoods which are mostly to be found in the expensive areas close to the city centre. Moreover, single mothers’ ability to live in lively, mixed

residential districts rather than in “ghettos” proved far more dependent on their job situations than was the case for conventional families.

Asked directly about the advantages and disadvantages of their own residential areas, most of the participants rated their home districts surprisingly positively, irrespective of whether they lived in the city centre or on the outskirts. Furthermore, they developed their individual ideas on how to improve them (for instance to open up collective family gardens between 1950s apartment blocks in former workers' housing areas such as Hamburg-Horn, which might not appear at first glance to most people to be attractive residential districts) and to improve the image of their local areas (for example by stressing the parks and gardens in the former working class area of Hamm). Unlike in the other discourses, the participants in Hamburg even developed improvement ideas for the architecture and family-friendly interior design of new buildings, ranging from suitable extensions to rooms and variable ground plans for flats, to adequate storage space for child buggies and a more individual design for buildings.

5.2 Child Care & Education

The compatibility of family and working life is one of the most important criteria for a family-friendly city. It depends, on the one hand, on child care facilities and, on the other, on suitable jobs. As a participant in the Hamburg discussion stressed, both the establishment of high-quality and reliable all-day child care and concessions by employers are high priorities in solving the problem. This topic was also one of the most important issues addressed in Munich where provision seems to be much lower than in Hamburg and Berlin. In the corresponding sub-forum, by far the majority of messages related to this topic. And in a user survey, child care provision was rated as the most important aspect for Munich as a child-friendly and family-friendly city. In Munich, participants emphasised the high quality of all-day child care services, but complained about their general unavailability and high costs. It was said that the plight of parents, and of single parents in particular, was significant, and they felt impelled to look for private solutions to this problem. Berlin has slightly different problems. Although child care was also an important issue, the families' suggestions and the critique in a city equipped with relatively high availability focussed on a better ratio of teacher per child, longer opening hours and an improved process for allocating the available kindergarten places. Notably, in Berlin a group of fathers stressed very clearly a lack of father-related expert advice while there were perceived to be too many advice services focussed on the mothers' needs. With the growth of different family models, this issue might become generally more important in future.

In addition to child care, the situation of the local schools was an important discussion issue in all three cities – ranging from necessary renovation of school buildings to diverse ideas on how to reform the whole educational system. Especially in Berlin, many participants expressed the urgent need for regular lunch offers for all pupils in all school types, which might refer to increasing child poverty in Berlin and Germany in total. In Hamburg, by comparison, participants complained much more about the increasing distance children had to travel to school as a result of the closure of several schools.

5.3 Traffic

Improvements in public transport were mainly and comprehensively discussed in Hamburg only. Rapid transit and underground stations should be adapted to provide accessibility through escalators and lifts. Participants were also in favour of providing stronger support for cyclists, for example by running an image campaign and expanding the network of cycle tracks but also through traffic lectures for old and young. In general, motor-driven transport should be avoided by establishing car-sharing concepts, extending traffic calming zones and stronger traffic checks. The last point was also central for the citizens of Munich. They were highly critical of speeding in traffic calming zones and of parked cars blocking pavements and cycle tracks. But overall they agreed that road users – whether cyclists or car drivers – should show consideration for children and become examples for better social interaction. The discourse on traffic in Berlin played a lesser role and combined the issues addressed in Hamburg and Munich. Supporting Munich's and Hamburg's demand for stronger traffic checks, they also stressed the particular importance of this for traffic calming zones. They additionally emphasised the need for more accessibility public transportation, but surprisingly little was said about the needs of cyclists.

5.4 Recreation and Play

The recreational value of all three cities seems to be quite good, but with different focal points. In Hamburg as well as in Munich, the quality of public parks and playgrounds was perceived as high. In Hamburg – according to the goals of the discourse – participants discussed intensively the characteristics of a “good” playground and developed a list of criteria for different user groups. In Munich, dog dirt – and dirt in general – was seen as the

biggest nuisance. But all in all, situations in both cities seem to be satisfactory. In contrast, people from Berlin warned against sacrificing the existing parks and green spaces for new building projects. Without a doubt, the capital of Germany has plenty to offer in terms of leisure attractions, but the majority seems to be expensive and commercial. Thus participants made a plea for more affordable holiday offers and criticised the closure of public swimming pools. The situation seems to become worse as children grow older. Several users suggested opening up school yards and suitable youth rooms for teenagers to make up for the lack of opportunities and space for older children. Moreover, as Berlin's users said, financial support decreases as children grow up and are excluded from various reductions regarding, for example, schools, medicines or leisure time. This means a high financial and cultural risk for those families with low incomes or many children and for single parents.

5.5 Family-friendly Atmosphere

Whether a city is perceived as family-friendly depends also on a child-friendly atmosphere, which most participants miss in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin. In particular, intolerance of children's noise and their need to get exercise was seen as a constant problem in the relationship between families and childless adults or the elderly. That this problem was based not upon isolated cases only but represented a trend had been confirmed by recent court decisions, especially in Hamburg, which have led to the closure of some child care facilities in residential areas as a result of "noise pollution" claims by neighbours. The increasing number of similar cases indicated an urgent and general need for action.

The most critical self-awareness on this issue was shown by participants in Munich who stressed that society itself has to ensure that it stays friendly to children and families by maintaining its tolerance and sense of community. However, despite all criticism, most families who participated actively in the discussions liked their city and the urban way of life, whether in Hamburg, Munich or Berlin.

6 Conclusion

eParticipation possibilities offer a variety of advantages. One of the most important is that politicians are gaining valuable insights into needs and wishes of the general public by using local expert knowledge. The results of the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin show what is important in general for families and where the special problems of each city can be found. As the previous chapter shows, Munich suffers the most from its high rents and its lack of child care facilities, whereas in Hamburg a general scepticism about the senate's credibility on family policy was much stronger than in the other two cities. In Berlin the central point was the quality of child care – and not its affordability as in Hamburg and Munich – combined with a concern about the protection of green spaces and parks.

All three online discourses succeeded within a short time in exploring and discussing the topic of family-friendliness from a multitude of relevant points of view. In the course of the different projects, participants identified specific family-related problems and constructively worked out different concepts on how to improve the situation and to increase family-friendliness from their perspectives as local experts. Moreover, the comparison of the three discussions revealed specific needs and separate solutions for the different cities with their individual family-related infrastructures and conditions.

The projects were successful in attracting the target group affected most by this issue – families with children – and enabling them to clarify their opinions and needs vividly. Even if the participants in Hamburg, Berlin and Munich are not representative of the cities' inhabitants as a whole, they still mentioned and discussed topics that did not affect them personally, namely the specific problems and needs of single parents, disabled persons, elderly people, underprivileged families or families with a very low income.

Worthy of mention is the fact that none of the discourses was able to involve a notable number of people with an immigrant background, which makes it clear that an Internet-based process is just one of several possible participation instruments to be selected according to the suitability and requirements of the individual field of application.

Yet it should be stressed that, despite the seriousness of the issues debated, the discussion within the forums was also fun for both participants and moderators, as the following quotation from a participant in Hamburg's online discussion indicates:

"The pressure families have to deal with is high. Therefore, to describe their distress is the first step in turning the situation around positively. Once you start, you develop new ideas and concepts on how to solve these problems. But it is rather inspiring when you recognise that the city council is listening and your suggestions might become reality in future. In this way democracy means fun and joy!"

Nevertheless, one of the most promising results of all three debates is that the issue attracts a user group which is not a majority in political discussions, whether online or offline. Differences between male and female political engagement are usually mirrored online. In contrast, the discussions in Hamburg, Munich and in Berlin were able to motivate female participants in particular to have their say and to dominate the discourse. This is an encouraging result for politics and eParticipation in general. Politicians are able to get into contact with a group which is more difficult to reach and involve in the traditional political process. By using such a topic, eParticipation has increased its scope and attracted a new user group.

Finally, the topic itself is of growing importance. "Family-friendliness pays off" – this is confirmed by the Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (IW – German Economics Institute) estimating that sustainable family policy could increase economic growth by 0.5 percentage points (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 2007). By picking up this topic, Hamburg, Munich and Berlin have taken a big step forward in the field of eParticipation. Not only did they show courage in coming up with a topic unusual in the area of eDemocracy, they also succeeded in demonstrating the potential of such issues for politics, the public and the promotion of eParticipation in general. And the need for such a debate is obvious: for the first time, the EU is spending more on generating employment than on agricultural subsidies, explains Vice-President and EU Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, Günter Verheugen, while Germany passed several new laws and regulations in 2008 to improve the situation of families (Press and Information Office of the German Federal Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women and Youth, 2008). As a result, it is to be expected that other European cities and municipalities will take up this topic not only to promote eParticipation but also to help politicians harness expert local knowledge in the interests of successful and sustainable family policy.

References

Albrecht, s. et al (2008). "eParticipation – Electronic Participation of Citizens and the Business Community in eGovernment". Study on Behalf of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Division IT 1. Institut für Informationsmanagement Bremen GmbH (ifib). Bremen, January 2008, p. 33.

http://www.ifib.de/publikationsdateien/study_eParticipation_engl.pdf

Lührs, R., et al. (2003). How to grow? Online Consultations about Growth in the City of Hamburg; in: Traunmüller (Ed.): Electronic Government. Second International Conference, EGOV 2003, Prague, Czech Republik, September 2003. Proceedings. Berlin, Heidelberg. S. 79-84.

Lührs, R., Pavón, J.; Schneider-Fontán, M. (2003). DEMOS Tools for Online Discussion and Decision Making, in: Juan Manuel Cueva Lovelle & al. (Eds.): Web Engineering, International Conference, ICWE 2003, Oviedo, Spain, July 14-18, 2003, Proceedings. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 2722 Springer 2003, ISBN 3-540-40522-4, p. 525-528

The Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (2007). Family-friendliness pays off, retrieved December 10, 2008 from http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/Artikel/2007/06/2007-06-04-familienfreundlichkeit-zahlt-sich-aus_en

The Press and Information Office of the German Federal Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women and Youth (2008). Familien erhalten in 2009 mehr Leistungen, retrieved December 19, 2008 from <http://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/generator/BMFSFJ/familie,did=118362.html>

Authors

[Birgit Hohberg](#)

Project manager

TuTech Innovation GmbH

<http://www.epractice.eu/people/1329>

[Maren Lübcke](#)

Consultant for E-Participation

TuTech Innovation GmbH

<http://www.epractice.eu/people/15623>

[Rolf Lührs](#)

Head of Department for interactive communication

TuTech Innovation GmbH

<http://www.epractice.eu/people/rolfuehrs>