

# **THE “CITIZENS` COMMUNITY” ARNSBERG IN GERMANY: EMPOWERING AND ENABLING CITIZENS<sup>1</sup>**

**Jörg Bogumil**  
**Distance Learning University Hagen**

**Hans-Josef Vogel**  
**Mayor of arnsberg**  
**Germany**

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## 1 Introduction

The City of Arnsberg, with a population of approximately 80.000 people, is situated in the Hochsauerlandkreis District in North-Rhine-Westphalia. It is the largest town in this area and it is also an administrative centre.

In Arnsberg the mayor started to modernise public management and governance structures relatively early. The reform process in Arnsberg is not so much based on the “new steering model” - a powerful performance management system at local level in Germany – as in many other German local authorities. By contrast, Arnsberg has emphasised customer-orientation and citizen engagement from the very beginning.

The specific Arnsberg approach towards local governance has been motivated by a fiscal crisis which began in the early 90s. As a result, the local council had to face budgetary problems and needed a concept which would provide a sustainable solution to the budget problems. The former city manager and present mayor, Hans Josef Vogel, considers citizens’ empowerment as an appropriate answer.

“For citizens to feel a sense of identity with their town we have to help them to be active in the community in which they live, to take responsibility for the life in their town and to co-operate with other people. Therefore the financial crisis offers the opportunity to give back sovereignty to the true sovereigns, the citizens, in order to come out of the financial crisis as a strengthened and activated community, which is able to organise its own life in the town.” (Vogel, 1995: 380).

Since then there have been many experiments with different innovative instruments of participation. After their success in Arnsberg some of these ideas have been imitated in other German local authorities (for an overview of the instruments of participation in Arnsberg, see: Bogumil/Vogel 1999).

In the following, the paper will focus on four issues:

- Why did the city of Arnsberg not implement the “New Steering Model” like many other German local authorities but develop its own concept of a citizens’ community?
- How does the city of Arnsberg promote citizens’ participation and engagement?
- Has citizen participation been an effective way to deal with the fiscal crisis?
- To which degree is it possible to transfer the experiences of Arnsberg to other German local authorities?

The paper is based on a two-year research project on “Citizens community. New forms of power relationships between citizens, town council and administration” which took off in 2001 at the Distance Learning University of Hagen. At the very beginning of the project in May 2001 we asked important stakeholders: the four leaders of the parties in the local council, the mayor, the treasurer, one leading civil servant and the head of the staff council. This project also includes interviews with all council members, all employees and a representative sample of the citizens in the City of Arnsberg. These interviews will be started in autumn 2001.

## 2 The Mayor as a Promotor of the Citizens' Community in Arnsberg

The reform process towards a citizens' community in the City of Arnsberg is closely linked with the mayor Hans Josef Vogel. In 1995 a majority of Social Democrats and the Green Party voted for him to become the city manager, although he is a member of the Cristian-Democratic Party. Since 1999 he has been the mayor of Arnsberg, directly elected by the people. According to interviews with key stakeholders in Arnsberg he is the leading figure in both the local council and local authority.

Citizens' community and improving the relations between the local authority and citizens are the key goals of the modernisation process in Arnsberg. This kind of governance philosophy differs quite considerably with the more internally oriented managerialism in other German local authorities. According to Arnsberg's reform philosophy, the reforms in the City of Arnsberg must include the following three elements:

- A customer-oriented local authority which is guided by private sector models and identifies the needs of citizens in order to increase customer satisfaction;
- However, citizens are not only customers which consume local public services. Citizens are also to be motivated to act as co-producers in local service delivery. By doing so, they may identify themselves better with the local authority and strengthen the social capital in the local area but also help the City of Arnsberg to reduce their budget deficit.
- Citizens should not only be co-producers but also be co-planners and participate actively in local projects. (on the various roles of the citizen as customer, co-producer and co-planer see Bogumil, 1999). This will allow the local authority to take advantage of the citizens' expertise and create a greater acceptance of public works.

Other positive conditions for the development of a citizens' community in the City of Arnsberg are the majorities in the local council, the behaviour of the opposition in the council, the small number of "Beigeordnete" (political civil servants) and the new constitution for local government in NorthRhine-Westphalia.

- The Christian-Democratic majority in the local council implies that the mayor has to consult few people in his party in order to get his proposals approved. Indeed, his party is not highly visible. According to the opposition, the strong conservative majority in the council also made it possible to enlarge the responsibilities of the mayor in legal provisions of the City of Arnsberg and to abolish committees with important control functions such as the personnel committee. Efforts to implement strategic management in the City of Arnsberg also meant that the council no longer deals with details.
- The behaviour of the opposition parties may be considered to be rather consensus-oriented. They may criticise the "governance style" of the mayor but to a lesser degree the contents of his decisions. Furthermore, after the lost election in 1999 the largest opposition party chose not to act destructively but adopted a pragmatic strategy of informal dialogue with the mayor. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to say that there is no party competition in Arnsberg as there are more and more voices in the Social-Democratic party who prefer to be more confrontational in the future.
- Also the small number of political civil servants has fostered the role of the mayor. Only one political civil servant – the treasurer - has remained from the previous four. This

allows the mayor to contact directly each staff member in the town hall himself. However, this may not necessarily be an efficient use of the mayor time.

- The new local government constitution in North Rhine Westphalia since 1994 has introduced the direct election of the mayor who is at the same time the head of the local administration (on the changes of local government constitutions in Germany, see Bogumil, 2001: 17). As a result, the position of the mayor has been strengthened. Nevertheless, this legal change should not be overestimated. There are many local authorities where the mayor has the same status, as for example, in Baden-Württemberg, but is not able to translate it into innovative politics. Therefore, this variable should be considered as a necessary but not sufficient condition for facilitating the changing roles of mayors.

### **3 Selected Instruments of Citizens' Participation in Arnsberg**

In the 1990s, the City of Arnsberg focused on the development of citizen participation as well as citizen engagement. The new participatory instruments are very different from formal mechanisms of participation within the planning of public works in the 1980s. As they are dialogue-oriented (see Bogumil, 2001a) they allow an effective participation of citizens which was not possible through the citizens assemblies related to building projects in the 1980s. Furthermore, citizens may participate in planning processes at an earlier stage.

As far as citizen engagement is concerned the City of Arnsberg focuses on individual engagement (centre for volunteers projects for elderly citizens, etc.). It provides less funds to clubs, one of the reasons being the local authority budget crisis. There are also bureaucratic obstacles to provide public grants to clubs due to tight regulations. Nevertheless, the City of Arnsberg seeks to support clubs in other ways (training, , "Akademie des Ehrenamtes", co-ordination, networking etc.). The following part of the chapter will focus on four selected participatory instruments. The analysis of the instruments will show that the development of the citizens' community also provokes the resistance of various powerful groups. The experiences made in Arnsberg show that it is necessary to take this resistance seriously and to offer compensation for the losers. Instruments only produce the desired results if the interests of other actors are also included in the reform process.

#### *3.1 Active complaint management*

In 1994 the City of Arnsberg introduced active complaint management which was a pioneering local innovation in Germany at that time. The goal of active complaint management is to encourage citizens to complain in order to obtain a clear picture of the views of citizens on the quality of life and the quality of public services in Arnsberg.

So far within a year around 1.800 complaints, suggestions, accolades and thanks have been received, whereby there is an increasing tendency with regard to telephone calls and e-mail contacts. The contents of complaints are subject to seasonal influences: During winter time snow clearance of roadways and sidewalks are typical subjects whereas during spring and summer time, maintenance and cleanliness of public parks and communal areas are considered. Complaints also often refer to subjects like benefit payment, environment and waste, administrative fines, planning and building permissions, asylum, drainage, cemeteries

and funerals. The majority of complaints are related to situations where citizens feel their rights are being impinged. They disagree with decisions taken by the municipality or they complain about the unfriendliness of the civic employees or that the decision making was insufficiently explained.

This implied the establishment of a central unit in the local administration where citizens may address to. The Complaints Unit is directly supervised by the mayor. This structure should enable short processing times to deal with citizens' complaints and to analyse the complaints in a systematic way. The Complaints Unit also seeks citizens' complaints through adverts in local newspapers (which is why it is active complaint management). For the mayor, complaints are not an unnecessary administrative burden but a kind of "free" town hall consultancy resp. consulting services offered by the citizens in their own affair.

The City of Arnsberg can draw a very positive balance as far as the effects of the active complaints management are concerned. This participatory instrument has shown several advantages:

Active complaint management

- reduces communication barriers,
- enables fast problem-solving,
- allows citizens activation,
- creates pressure on citizen-orientation on all levels within the local authority
- recognises and uses the street-level information of complaints (see: Netzwerk Kommunen der Zukunft, 1999: 46)

In spite of these benefits, interviews with local stakeholders in Arnsberg made evident that active complaint management was very controversial in the local administration when it was first introduced. Many employees considered it as a control instrument which might lead to punishment and delay promotions. The head of the staff council described the conflict situation in the following way.

"Staff thought that we may now have bloody minded managers 'who will use the complaints to dump on us'. They have watched this happen to some one else and thought 'I could be set up the same way'. For example, some experienced engineers who were soon to retire felt put under pressure by street-level colleagues."

Nevertheless, the mayor learnt quickly from these difficulties. Employees were extensively informed about the objectives of active complaint management. The mayor also made an agreement with the staff council which ensures that the analysis of complaints does not take place at the level of individual employees. Since then, employees have perceive this participatory instrument much more positively as recent interviews have shown.

Furthermore, council members were not enthusiastic about active complaints management either. They considered themselves as key persons in their voting district to whom citizens could address to if they had a small problem. The fact that they could often solve the problem in the local administration was important to them as a guarantee to be reelected. In order to persuade the council members to take a positive view towards active complaint management the city administration started a dialogue with them and pointed out the advantages. The local politicians could now address to the Central Complaints Unit with citizens' complaints which

would solve the problem much faster than previously. They could continue to report the result of their request to the citizens in order to gain positive reputation among voters. Or as a senior local manager expressed in an interview: “The gift is presented by the local politician”. Meanwhile, most party leaders in the City of Arnsberg are content with active complaint management.

Meanwhile other middle-sized cities such as the City of Seelze, Göttingen and the City of Unna have also imitate the Arnsberg model of complaint management.

### 3.2 *The “futures” workshop on the train station in Arnsberg*

The increased participation of citizens as co-planners in local issues proved to be quite controversial in the City of Arnsberg (as is the case in other German local authorities). The council members had concerns that their power would be reduced and that the representative democracy would be questioned. Even so the council always has the last say there is a common awareness that would be politically unwise to vote against the results of a comprehensive citizen participation.

Nevertheless, at the time of the interviews all party leaders had a very positive view of the “futures” workshop in the City of Arnsberg. The reason being is that they had had the experience that the “futures” workshop did not reduce room of manoeuvre but rather enabled the local council to take action and to solve a long-standing local problem. In the past, the council could not find a solution as to how to solve the massive traffic problems in the planning area around the Arnsberg train station. The council commissioned various experts. Citizens addressed conflicting demands to the council. The “futures” workshop, the mayors idea, made it possible for all concerned stakeholders to identify a financially viable solution with citizens being guided by professional planners. Instead of an expensive tunnel in the planning area there is now the view that a more intelligent fine-tuning of the traffic-light system for cars with the level crossings as well as an additional roadway would be sufficient to reduce traffic congestion.

About 350 citizens participated in the “futures” workshop on the Arnsberg train station. Without specifying the details of the consulting process the main outcomes of the “futures” workshop may be summarised as follows:

- The “futures” workshop allowed the participation of many citizens. Nevertheless, it was possible to have extensive discussions in small groups.
- An external team of professional planners developed and visualised various options which resulted in a relatively detailed draft plan.
- The consultation could be accomplished within a few days.

All actors interviewed had a very positive view of the “futures” workshop. Indeed, six out of eight interviewees thought that the “futures” workshop was the best citizens’ participation project in Arnsberg in the last years. In view of the many projects involving citizens’ participation in the City of Arnsberg this result is significant.

According to the actors involved in the “futures” workshop the main achievement was that a solution to a long-standing traffic problem could be found in a consensus-oriented way. The council, however, had not been able to agree on a solution for years. In particular, the residents of the planning area could agree that a tunnel would not solve the traffic problems. As a result, nobody is able “to argue for a tunnel on legitimate grounds” anymore – as one actor said – so that this solution is not acceptable any more.

In hindsight, it is difficult to reconstruct how this consensus was achieved. One actor describes the discussion in the following way: The residents wanted to have a tunnel. The external planners proved by showing a respective tunnel situation in the City of Arnsberg that this would be of no use. As the evening progressed less and less citizens stayed at the workshop so that in the end the planners were almost among themselves when they searched for a compromise. Nevertheless, a few citizens stayed on who wanted to have a tunnel. “They sat until night and fought for a consensus”. Finally the idea of a tunnel was dropped.

The dialogue did not only result in an agreement about what should not be done but also many alternative traffic solutions could be gathered. In particular, the professional planners stressed the competence of many citizens and that it was possible to include actors with a major problem-solving capacity such as the German Train Company. Even the opposition parties recognised that citizens’ participation is not always a zero sum game but that it allows development of win-win situations for all stakeholders. Indeed, the Arnsberg case proved that citizens’ engagement does not reduce the power of councils but that consensus-oriented decision-making allows the creation of win-win situations (Bogumil and Holtkamp, 1999).

Another important success factor for the futures workshop was the excellent preparation and professional management of the workshop. The consultation process has definitely improved the image of the planning area. For example, two enterprises suggested investing in the planning area after the futures workshop had taken place.

In the view of most stakeholders, the main problem of the “futures” workshop is implementation. Citizens may think “we spent days in the “futures” workshop and until now they have not even renewed the lights in the pedestrian tunnel but only removed a few benches and some bushes”. Furthermore, one of the best ideas which was to link the level crossings with the traffic light system for cars has not been able to be implemented so far. This solution costs about 0.5 million Euros and the City of Arnsberg is dependent on some grants from the state. However, the state funding will only be available in 2003. If the implementation continues to drag on there is the risk that citizens will no longer be interested in the specific solution of the traffic problem because they are no longer concerned by it. For example, their children may go to a secondary school which is not located in the area around the train station.

In any case the realisation and implementation velocity must be improved, which sometimes encounters difficulties where third parties like superior public authorities or other institutions (Deutsche Bahn) are involved. Here it is important to constantly inform about barriers and resistances.

### 3.3 *The delegation of facility management on sports associations*

In 1995, Arnsberg started to contract out the management of sports facilities to local clubs. In 1999, already 11 out of 14 sports facilities were delegated to clubs. The clubs received 70 per cent of the previous local subsidies to run the sports facilities. This allowed considerable savings in the budget of the City of Arnsberg and improved the identification of the users with “their” sports facility.

In the beginning, the clubs were sceptical about their ability to mobilise volunteers as their volunteers were already heavily occupied with club activities. However, they soon recognised the advantages of contract management for their club. The additional income could be used to give their volunteers some modest financial compensation for their engagement. As soon as the first sports facility was delegated to a club in 1995 all other clubs quickly recognised the advantages of contract management. So the clubs approached the local authority and asked for the delegation of their sports facility.

Altogether, the contract management model works best in the smaller districts of the City of Arnsberg. So far, there have been only minor conflicts about some specific provisions of the contract (who pays for investments?) between the clubs and the local authority but nothing serious. Usually, the local administration makes concessions as it does not want “jeopardise the whole system”. The common view is that this innovation has fostered the identification of the clubs with their facility and helped to reduce the budget deficit. “People tend to identify with their sports grounds in a different way when they invest their own work and heart in them” and also use them more cautiously.

The engagement of the voluntary sector in facility management in the City of Arnsberg is a good example that sometimes it is necessary to find a small entry point into the citizens’ community before other groups recognise that they may also benefit from the co-production of local services. A “domino effect” then often takes place. For example a sports club is currently building a new sports field in a district of Arnsberg supported by the City but at much lower costs. Before, sports fields were under the support of the City. Now it is the club itself that administers the building ownership.

The restructuring of a fire station by the district unit of the fire brigade is another example. There is also a Förderverein founded by volunteers of the fire brigade that now acts as building owner and supporter of the fire station. The advantages are obvious: The voluntary fire brigade is now able to restructure “its” own building according to general guidelines; within the next two years the City of Arnsberg will save 32,5% per cent of the restructuring expenses. So far an ownership structure of the fire brigade members takes the place of the former tenant-landlord-relation between voluntary fire brigade and City. As contracted, the complete husbandry of the building will be passed over to the Förderverein starting 01.01.2004. Through this, future civic costs for administration can be saved.

### 3.4 *The delegation of street cleaning to citizens*

In Arnsberg street cleaning is partially done by residents on a voluntary basis. In return they pay reduced fees volunteering for street cleaning is perceived



“as a symbol for increased identification with the neighbourhood and the willingness to accept responsibility for neighbourhoods” (Vogel, 1995: 383).

Yet, the delegation of street cleaning to citizens does not help to reduce the budget deficit as it only concerns local fees. Many citizens also criticise that not all residents do their job and that all in all, the City of Arnsberg has become more dirty. Problems arise when a resident does not clean his/her street any more as the City of Arnsberg no longer sends street cleaning machines. Such cases happen from time to time. In this case, the local authority unbureaucratically reacts with a fast task force. In a larger scale this would indeed contradict the principle of equivalence. Furthermore, the City of Arnsberg could not yet reduce the number of sweeping machines so that the fix costs have remained the same. On the contrary, other residents have to pay higher fees which is not quite fair. According to this a solution will be found soon. Last but not least, not all residents have the choice whether they want to sweep themselves or pay a fee for the city to do this job. For example, in Germany ring roads cannot be exempt from city run local street cleaning.

The street cleaning model works relatively well in small villages where residents have always cleaned the street even when the sweeping machine of the local authority had been used. This shows that the willingness to engage in local service delivery is bigger in rural areas than in urban areas. Due to the street cleaning tradition of village residents, the communication between neighbours is also more intense than in the cities.

### *3.5 Honorary issue of the quality card for Arnsberg's watercourses (Gewässergütekarte).*

With the assistance of the municipality the Arnsberg angling-clubs have issued a quality card for local watercourses that provides important information on the quality of flowing waters. For this extensive samples of water and examinations had to be conducted. The results of this were documented in substantial maps.

Thereby a win-win-situation was created for all participants. The angling-clubs which so far only played the role of "nature-users" now gained recognition as "conservationists". Furthermore they are interested in a good water quality in order to pursue their leisure sport.

As a result of the voluntary engagement by the angler-club' members the City of Arnsberg received sufficient resources to issue a new and more cost-efficient quality card for Arnsberg's watercourses. In particular the preparation of this quality card can be considered as a community project: The municipality has determined the content framework as well as the scope of presentation and carried out the water investigation at its own expense. Moreover the samples of water as well as the presentation of the results have been performed by the angling-clubs.

### **3.6 Citizen Participation as an Instrument to Deal with the Fiscal Crisis in Arnsberg?**

In spite of these positive factors, the reduction of the budget deficit continues to be a pressing problem in Arnsberg. By 1999 104 job cuts were made in order to cope with the fiscal crisis and the structural yearly local budget deficit reduced to about 1 million Euro. It is evident that

also the various initiatives to promote citizens' participation and engagement in local issues contributed to this fiscal consolidation process. There are however no exact figures recorded.

Now, in 2001 the local budget shows suddenly a deficit of 12.3 million Euro. This is mainly due to new responsibilities imposed upon local government by the state. In the future, it may become more difficult to empower citizens in Arnsberg as the local authority may be lacking the resources to provide a good infrastructure for an effective citizens' community.

To start the modernising process in Arnsberg the fiscal crisis was important, but now it becomes more and more a real problem. You can see from this example that to a limited extent money can be saved through citizens participation and engagement. But the main reason for the budget deficit lies in decisions made by the higher levels of government and in the financial structure of local authorities.

#### **4 The Transfer of the Arnsberg Experiences in other German Local Authorities**

Many instruments of citizens' participation and engagement have been invented and applied in Arnsberg successfully and imitated by other local authorities (on various instruments of citizens' participation see Holtkamp 2000). Nevertheless, there are only a few local authorities which seek to learn from the Arnsberg experiences. The City of Arnsberg is definitely not to blame. It is a medium-sized city for German standards which also has small villages. This shows that the citizens' projects, run in Arnsberg, can be transferred to local authorities of different sizes. Furthermore, the City of Arnsberg faces very strong fiscal pressures so that even local authorities with similar budgetary pressures could follow the example of Arnsberg. Last but not least, key stakeholders of the City of Arnsberg are engaged in an exemplary way to communicate their experiences to other local authorities. Therefore, the lack of learning in other local authorities must have different reasons.

Decision-makers in other local authorities must be convinced of the "performance" of citizens' participation and engagement in a personal dialogue which also allows them to speak about problems openly. It is evident that publications about best practice in scientific journals are not an appropriate means to hand out to decision-makers. It is rather necessary to develop frameworks which take into account the limited financial resources of local authorities and the limited time of key actors at local level. In Germany, the network of local authorities has only partially been successful. The main problem of this networking initiative of the Bertelsmann Foundation is that only a small club of innovators meet without being able to attract many new local authorities. It seems as if only those who already know almost everything about each other want to learn from each other.

Therefore, the key issue is how many local actors *want* to learn at all. The willingness to learn seems to be limited so far in German local authorities. Even imitations of local innovations require some will to take risks. Furthermore, the citizens' community may create resistance among powerful stakeholders who fear that they will have to delegate responsibilities to citizens.

In order to speed-up the transfer of learning about the development of citizens' communities it is important to highlight that citizens' participation and engagement may create win-win situations. Of course, this is not always feasible. But even then, it is possible to limit the "losses" of important stakeholders. For example, the workers of the local administration in Arnsberg are clearly the losers of the delegation of management of sports facilities to clubs. However an explicit agreement to avoid compulsory redundancies means that no workers have to fear losing their jobs because of the volunteering of clubs. All in all, the experiences of the City of Arnsberg have shown that win-win situations create acceptance among all key stakeholders, which is vital for the sustainability of the citizens' community.

In order to bring about win-win-situations it is important to know the interests of different stakeholder groups in order to analyse conflicts of interests. This is for sure one of the most "noble tasks" of practice-oriented administrative sciences. In particular, many public agencies are hesitant to raise conflicts of interests and problems in an open way in publications on best practice.

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Jörg Bogumil, Privatdozent Dr., is an Associate Professor at the department of Public Policy Analysis and Administration Science at the Distance Learning University of Hagen. His favorite research areas are local politics, organization theorie and public administration. He is one of the chairpersons of the Working Group 'Research on Local Politics' (Arbeitsgruppe Lokale Politikforschung, Lopof) of the German Association of Political Science.

Hans Josef Vogel, Mayor of the city of Arnsberg