Option 8 - The only poll you can trust is the one you falsified yourself

A few weeks ago I asked friends and followers to participate in my short survey on civic participation. Eleven questions, space for your own experiences and suggestions. 134 people were kind enough to participate, and there were also a few conversations on the topic in the comment columns on Facebook and Twitter. What I deduced from this and what I will take with me for my further engagement, I will roll out here for you in my usual epic breadth. You asked for it!

I've always hated statistics as a subject, so I won't go into much depth here, especially since the type of survey doesn't really allow for it. Even at the beginning, there was criticism of precisely this: "In the wild such surveys are only done to support a result previously desired by the author. Therefore, my question was always: What must and should come out of the survey?"

Busted. Of course, by formulating the questions I gave a very concrete direction, **BUT**: I had no idea what I was aiming at. The only thing that should come out is what the participants wanted to tell me. On precisely defined points, but also beyond that.

Huh?

I have to backtrack a bit, I hope you have drinks and snacks ready. If not, stock up, I'll wait here.

Ready? Here we go:

When we first sat down with the Active Citizens, we played the game "Citizen participation - hell, no!" created by Christophe Gouache. In this game, we took on different roles, such as elected political representatives, employees of the administration and representatives of other interests. They were then asked to explain why they **did not want** citizen participation from various points of view. The foundation for "how do we get to the root of the matter?" was laid, because from the argumentation we could deduce where the problem lies and what means are needed to bring together all those involved in life in the city and bring them to a common denominator.

In the further course of our work we dealt with so-called problem trees. Each of these trees had a thematic field; my working group dealt with diversification. At the root of our tree we found problems such as "a disproportionate number of men participate", "civic participation does not appeal to young people", "marginalised people are also not noticed by civic participation". In the treetop, the ideal state was again described, at the trunk we considered how we could get there.

One of the conclusions from this working group was that civic participation must come to the people. (I am now avoiding the phrase "meet them on their own ground" because it is somehow very hackneyed and, despite its approach, forgets most people). It must be as open as possible to everyone, offer everyone participation and involvement, and do so as actively as possible, because only the usual suspects come by themselves. Not that we want to exclude them, for heaven's sake, no. But we want to have the broadest possible spectrum of ideas, suggestions, expertise and objections. What is ultimately realised through citizen participation is another matter altogether. It's purely about the opportunity to get involved and help shape things.

What does all this have to do with the survey?

For me, our survey within the group was still too imprecise, as I noticed in the course of time that very few people had an idea of what citizen participation should actually be and that, on the other hand, most of them had obstacles to getting involved.

At the transnational meeting in Santa Maria da Feira we discussed in the evening who we had least on our radar so far and who might feel excluded. In order to cover the breadth of society, and in addition to the interest of the privileged, more educated and predominantly older citizens, we had to consider how they got there.

That evening I had the idea to do a survey to find out which aspects make citizen participation attractive and which obstacles still need to be overcome. After all, opening up to diversity also means that everyone [who adheres to democratic principles] should feel welcome and citizen participation must be a space free of discrimination and as accessible as possible.

As already written, 134 people took part in the survey, exactly half of them from Dinslaken. This information was important for me in order to take local characteristics into account in the answers and to introduce direct concerns into our ULG (URBACT Local Group), if relevant.

In the fourth question, I asked for information on marital status, whether there were younger children and whether you were a caregiving relative.

"I almost cried because of the mention of caregiving relatives".

This sentence was uttered by a participant in the closing words. You can let it sink in for a moment. Caregiving relatives make up the largest non-commercial care service in Germany, they have to deal with authorities and barriers on a daily basis and, with 1.76 million people, they are an often simply forgotten marginalised group. In addition to the people they care for.

Many of them lack the time to get involved because of their domestic situation. Which is a pity, in my opinion, because it is precisely they who bring with them extensive expertise when it comes to accessibility and participation. Specialised services of the administration also bring this with them, but from a completely different perspective. In Dinslaken, for example, there was a round table to make the playgrounds more inclusive. The responsible specialised services were present, as well as representatives of Lebenshilfe (an NGO working with severely disabled people) and the integrative kindergarten. Despite several announcements in the newspaper and social media, only one family with a disabled child in need of care came. Why? Because they wanted to network. Because they wanted to participate from the users' point of view. And why only one? Because it just somehow fit into the tight weekly and daily schedule. Because others couldn't organise a care substitute and couldn't take the child or the senior citizen to be cared for with them.

One could now claim that the playground would have become just as great without the input of this family. But you can also simply ask the next family with a relative in need of care what could be improved in terms of urban planning. And then ask again how much of this the city has on its radar. I don't even mean that in a bad way. But as a citizen you are an expert in your own matter when it comes to life in the city.

"Citizen participation must not be allowed to degenerate into a request programme. It is enough that local politicians are generally not experts. There is no need for more laymen who only care about their own sensitivities. A panel of experts from among the citizens would be my ideal," one middle-aged gentleman wrote. Another said, "People with no political experience or expertise should operate at their level."

When I read that, I mentally went immediately into counter-argumentation, not without getting upset about how arrogant and nonsensical I found these statements. But then I remembered the game from the beginning. In principle, the participants had reproduced exactly those prejudices that we had presented in the role play. Which also seemed logical and cemented to me at the beginning. I was only able to overcome these prejudices during the two years of work on the topic and in cooperation with

the other active citizens. Because citizen participation does not mean that everyone gets what they want.

It means that everyone who wants to can get involved. However, laws (physical as well as legal) have to be respected, a project has to be financeable. This precludes the implementation of completely utopian ideas, but does not prohibit expressing and taking the best from them.

It is hoped that as much public participation as possible will lead to the highest possible acceptance and use of a project such as the playgrounds. In other words, people are more likely to use and maintain something that has been created from their own ideas, and they are more willing to spend money on it (in the sense of tax money and subsidies).
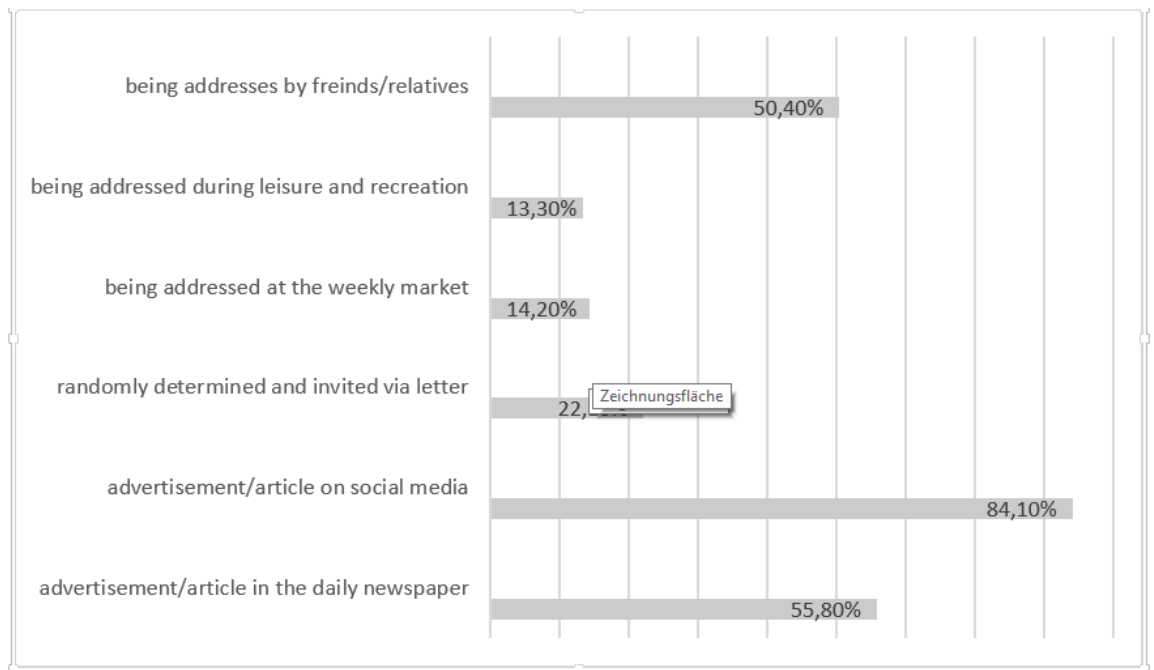
In the survey, I therefore wanted to know under what circumstances the participants would get involved.
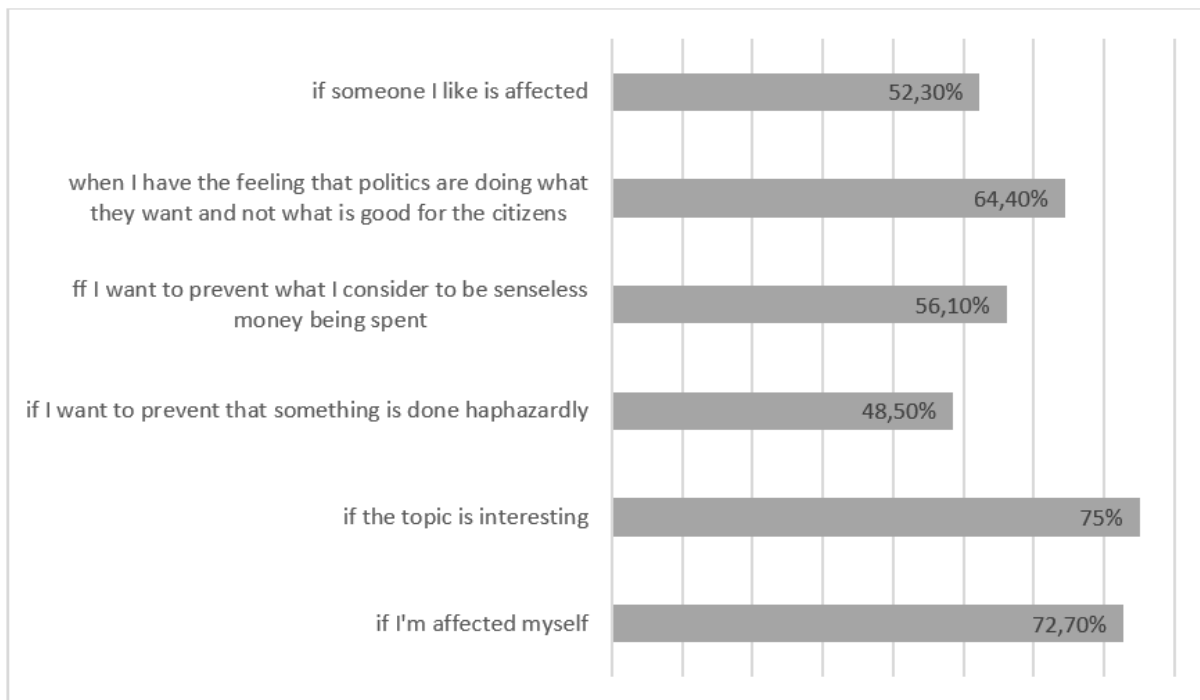
By mistake, I had added an "Option 8" to the answer options, which a prankster actually selected. More on this later.

I draw no further conclusions from the frequency of the answers (it was possible to select several or all of them), as they speak for themselves. What I find more interesting at this point are the various additions. "When it brings about more inclusion", "if interventions are made in nature and the environment", "in all public issues, such as citizens' councils" and "if I want to actively shape the life and appearance of my city" are examples that were formulated in this or similar ways several times.

The motives are therefore quite different, as is the way in which the participants want to be made aware of citizen participation.

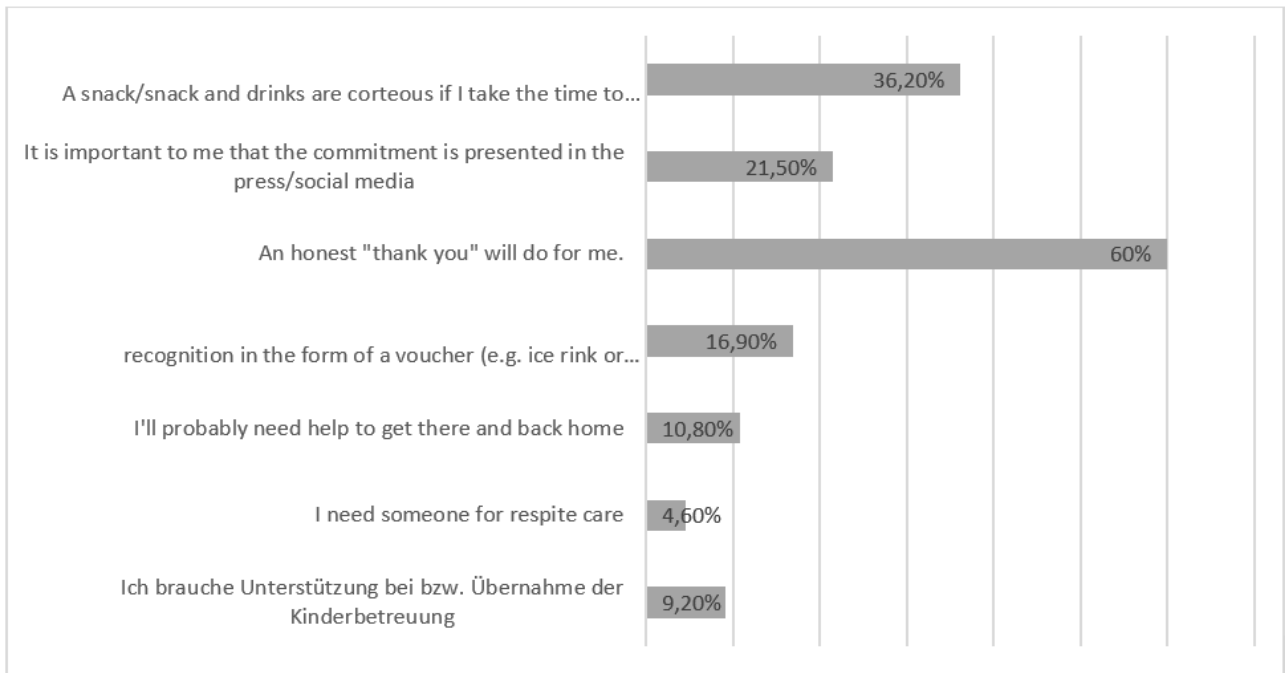|	
being addresses by freinds/relatives	50,40%
being addressed during leisure and recreation	13,30%
being addressed at the weekly market	14,20%
randomly determined and invited via letter	22, [Zeichnungsfläche]
advertisement/article on social media	84,10%
advertisement/article in the daily newspaper	55,80%

Since this survey had spread predominantly via social media, it is understandable how it came to the high approval of being made aware of citizen participation there. Personally, I would have expected more votes in the random generator, but perhaps I have simply described it too poorly. In the URBACT methodology, it has proven quite successful to have the municipal administration select random addresses from the population register under data protection conditions and then invite the identified persons to a citizen participation event. These events are then structured in such a way that even without prior knowledge of the matter, one has the opportunity to develop a project on a topic together with the other participants.

In addition to my suggestions, there were ideas for the city to publish a participation newsletter, to put up posters with information, links and QR codes [possibly in the neighbourhood of the project], to offer information events and to hold city cultural or other networking meetings.

But how are these projects supposed to run in the first place?

So after finding out what makes citizens want to participate and how they find out about it, I wanted to know how they want to get involved.

A snack/snack and drinks are corteous if I take the time to...	36,20%
It is important to me that the commitment is presented in the press/social media	21,50%
An honest "thank you" will do for me.	60%
recognition in the form of a voucher (e.g. ice rink or...	16,90%
I'll probably need help to get there and back home	10,80%
I need someone for respite care	4,60%
Ich brauche Unterstützung bei bzw. Übernahme der Kinderbetreuung	9,20%

What do I mean by "safe space"?

At the very beginning of the survey, I asked the participants what gender they were, whether they belonged to a minority and whether they had ever experienced discrimination.

For 60% of women, there were 34% men and 6% non-binary, inter* or otherwise genderqueer people. All genderqueer participants stated that they had already experienced exclusion/discrimination because of their gender identity. 33% of the respondents stated that they had already been excluded because of a disability. In addition, there was exclusion because of the disability of a partner or child as well as homosexuality. Multiple answers were possible. Overall, 68% stated that they had already been excluded from social situations for reasons other than those mentioned above. Two thirds.

This was the moment when I checked the results for the first time using the individual survey questionnaires. Two thirds of the people had had negative experiences in their encounters with other people. So lasting that they consider it worth mentioning in a private citizen participation survey. And here it doesn't matter how everyone else might have experienced this situation - it's about the fact that this person felt this way, feeling can't be denied to anyone. Of course, it's all purely subjective, and probably not strictly scientifically representative, but it's still a significant number that you can't lose sight of when you talk about participation culture.

That's where the safe space comes in. Where I feel safe, accepted and as an equal member of a [temporary] group, I am happy to contribute my opinion and expertise as well as time and work. This "safe space" must therefore be provided by citizen participation. What sounds obvious, however, involves empathy-based facilitation and knowledge of pitfalls. It is by no means a question of treating traumas or pampering the buttocks of hyperwoke snowflakes. It just has to be clear from the beginning that discrimination against other participants will not be tolerated and that diversity is explicitly desired. At this point I must briefly emphasise that this paragraph sets out my (!) idea of civic participation and corresponds to what I learned in the URBACT seminars. This does not necessarily reflect the opinion of Active Citizens and contents of the IAP (Integrated Action Plan).
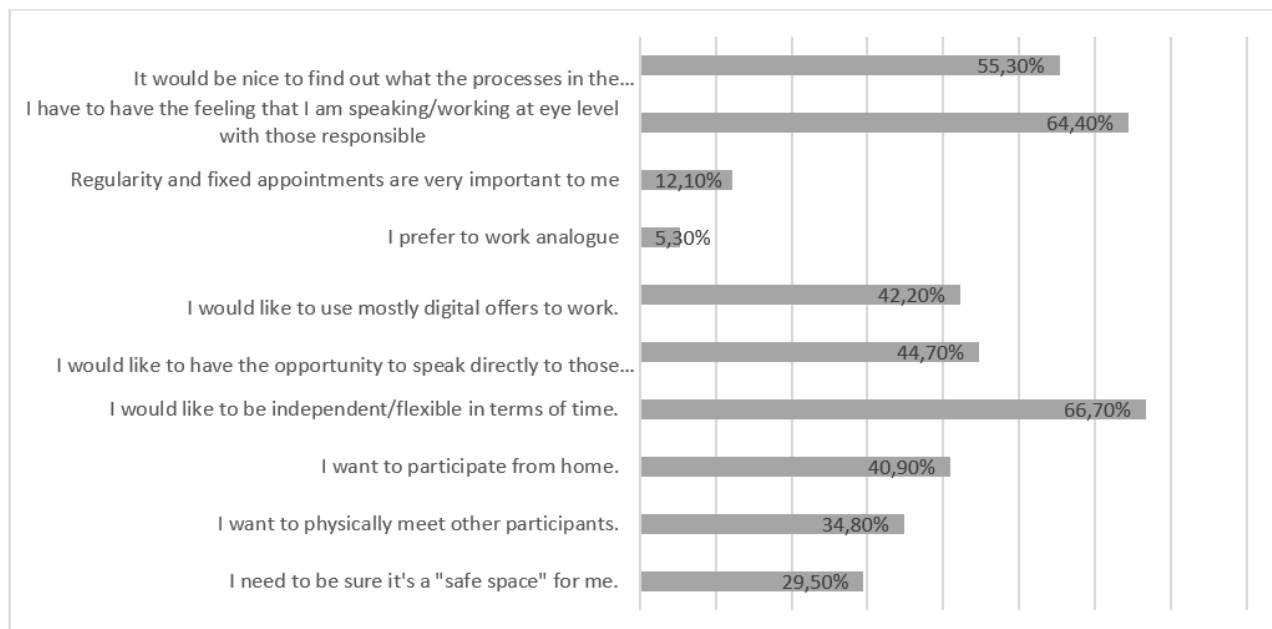
Additions to the question of "What should citizen participation look like?" included that communication at eye level seems particularly important, as well as that transparency within the project should be the basis for an honest and open exchange.

Now the mother of all questions arises: What are my profits if I participate as a citizen?

Well, in cases where I am affected myself or my environment, I can have a direct influence on the design. Whether it's by helping to plan and organise a cultural event that interests me, by clearing the Rotbach, where I like to go for a walk, of rubbish, or by campaigning for the works of art in the Bergpark in Lohberg to finally be signposted, because I'd like to know what they're all about. Maybe none of this concerns me personally, but I want to join the good cause and volunteer.

He who must not be named. The Volunteer.

Aid organisations, clubs and associations can tell you a thing or two about how hard it sometimes is to find volunteers. One idea that we at Active Citizens have been working on more often has been the question of whether a special incentive or recognition could help to increase engagement in citizen participation.

Statement	Percentage
It would be nice to find out what the processes in the…	55,30%
I have to have the feeling that I am speaking/working at eye level with those responsible	64,40%
Regularity and fixed appointments are very important to me	12,10%
I prefer to work analogue	5,30%
I would like to use mostly digital offers to work.	42,20%
I would like to have the opportunity to speak directly to those…	44,70%
I would like to be independent/flexible in terms of time.	66,70%
I want to participate from home.	40,90%
I want to physically meet other participants.	34,80%
I need to be sure it's a "safe space" for me.	29,50%

Flexible, employee-friendly times were requested several times in the free texts, as was the possibility to bring children along if necessary. "Respect and appreciation for being involved", "positive, constructive atmosphere at the meetings" and the desire to "experience direct effects and results" and also "not to be fobbed off with partial areas [of decisions], such as the colour of the flooring in the city park". This, by the way, echoes the "eye level" point from the paragraph above.

But what do distances, childcare and preventive care have to do with incentives?

As can be seen from the answer "A thank you is enough for me!" apart from media coverage and a little hospitality on site, no other incentives are needed to motivate citizens. Appreciation of the work can and should also mean that the initiators abandon the attitude that "whoever wants to, will come".

This requires a lot of communication and coordination, but ensures a fairer form of participation and more inclusion.

Which, by the way, I disproportionately elegantly segued into the topic of "What does accessibility mean to you in the context of civic participation?" didn't I?

There was a free text option available for this question, from which I list the most frequently mentioned and most relevant points:

- No sound from music or generally a low-stimulus environment.

- No bright lights and light effects.

- Enough time and guidelines in social situations

- Not too long a duration

- Mandatory masks, air filters, preferably online because of chronically ill children in the household

- Subtitles, written communication, sign language

- Simple and clearly structured language.

- Simple language, flexible ways to participate.

- Comprehensible language (because of hearing loss).

- That texts are not too small.

- Opportunities for written participation, participation from home.

- Access for everyone in their preferred form (in writing, orally, by telephone, by electric mail, in person, if necessary with a translator) and as uncomplicated and unbureaucratic as possible.

- Possibility of digital participation

- Virtual participation options.

- Flexibility in all colours. Mostly, participations are dedicated to very fixed structures and I can't make such appointments due to work and co.

- Online access to all offers.

- Time independence

- Remote and online possibilities. If offline is mandatory, then accessibility for as long as possible, e.g. to documents on display, so that I can avoid rush hours.

- Economic accessibility

- Good accessibility by public transport.

- Good bus connections, low fares.

- Barrier-free access.

- Wheelchair friendly.

- Existing and functioning lifts.

- Large rooms that allow manoeuvring with a wheelchair, jacket and luggage storage.

As you can see, I have clustered the answers a little. In addition to the possibility of being able to participate in face-to-face events as easily as possible even with disabilities, the desire to enable hybrid models and general access online was expressed in many cases. In this way, everyone can participate at their own pace, at their own preferred time, for example, in voting, viewing and evaluating plans, submitting proposals and expressing ideas. Of course, it is not possible to clear the Rotbach of rubbish online and offline it is much worse to let everyone have their say on the plan for the subsequent use of the Hippodrome. But the desire for digital participation and interaction is great.

I would like to make one more comparison. In the 2020 local elections in Dinslaken, 26,621 people (49% of those eligible to vote) cast their ballots. 11,559 of them voted by postal ballot (which corresponds to 43 % of all those who voted). A clear sign of participation from the sofa.

51 % of those eligible to vote did not cast their ballot. Whatever the reason. It's their own fault. Dinslaken has about 70,700 inhabitants. On the one hand, this means that the council in its composition and also the mayor were elected by less than 40% of the citizens. That's okay, we live in a democracy, that's legitimate.

However, just under 54,000 eligible voters in Dinslaken also means that about 16,000 people in Dinslaken are not eligible to vote. Children and young people as well as those who live here but are not Germans or nationals of the 26 other EU member states. They are represented by the city council and the mayor just as much as those who have voted or not. The only difference is that they had no influence on it. Maybe some of them regret their [non-]election in the meantime.

What am I aiming for?

Citizen participation is not a competitor to the city council. Citizen participation is a supplement that allows those who are not entitled to vote or have not voted, but who may be affected by a measure, to have their say and do so. (Re-use of the open-air swimming pool, Hippodrome development, playground design, cultural programme, etc.) Citizen participation gives everyone the right to co-create, to jointly shape urban life.

Planning agency Evergrey: "Do you want dark (A) or light (B) cobblestones in the park?"

Citizens:

- Cobblestones? Are you nuts? I live there. It's really noisy, especially when people walk along with trolleys.

- I'm not a fan of it either. I'd prefer a smooth, clean paved path where my child/dad in a wheelchair won't get whiplash when we walk there. Or gravel, gravel is okay too.

- Gravel is dumb for scooters and skateboards and stuff.

- We need trees so that the tar is cooled by the shade in summer.

- Benches, benches along the paths. I need to rest with the rollator in between. Gravel is difficult for me.

- ... (you can go on)

Citizen participation does not exclude, for example, planning offices and other experts. But it makes a [r]evolutionary decisive step: citizens come to eye level with those who are responsible for and carry out the implementation.

In the survey, it became clear that the desire to exercise this right to co-creation does exist. If the conditions are created for it.

"I think it would be good in the future if citizen participation were taken more seriously by people between 20 and 35 and if it took place at all. Of course, statistically more old people live in Dinslaken and more old people sit on the councils. But this makes Dinslaken increasingly unattractive for my age group or younger [...] The city should also optimise its processes so that the approval or discussion of applications does not take so long that the time of the project can only be shortened. Or you only half profit from funding although you could get much more out of quick processes."

The quote comes from one of the final words of the questionnaire, another one says:

"Administration should be much more transparent. At the moment it is often an impenetrable castle for the citizen, which repels more than it invites."

And:

"Unfortunately, I believe that the road to participation is a rocky one. Nevertheless ... Good luck [...]"

The right to option 8

Just as the participant in the survey had the right to select option 8, I had the right to remove this option in the analysis. Because option 8 was not feasible. And no one else wanted option 8. Option 8 would not have stood up to a democratic vote. Option 8 would not have been fundable. Option 8 was good for a little laugh. And for this quintessence.

Citizen participation contains many options, many variables.

Be it the agreement on how the elderly lady in the wheelchair will get to the planning session for the tree planting event or the design of the working environment for the 30 randomly selected primary school children who will create the children's cultural programme. Be it the caring single mother who contributes professional expertise to the next hackathon but needs relief at home to do so. Be it the non-binary person who wants to be addressed and written to with the pronouns they/them.

Of course, one can do without this diversity; as I already wrote "whoever wants to, comes". But let's turn the tables and exclude the regulars from co-creation. Only people of colour are allowed to exercise their right to co-determination and co-creation, only people with a migration background, disabled people, women, young people, children, precariously employed people, [gender-]queer people...

Before the first privileged middle-aged gentleman suffers a heart attack: When everyone thinks of themselves, everyone is thought of, right?

Oh, that also didn't strike the right note. Sorry, I don't want to prick you any further. I don't want to keep on teasing. It's not good for the cause. But it's just as detrimental to it if you ignore the people to your left and right. They are all part of our society and bring options 1-7 to the table. Perhaps also option 8. And they so prevent us all from being presented with only options A and B.