

Name: Ichmache>Politik

Location: Berlin, Germany

Form: Digital

Context

Ichmache>Politik is a project of the German Federal Youth Council (Deutscher Bundesjugendring – DBJR) which uses digital methods (ePartool) to support young people's participation in policy making at a national level. DBJR is the umbrella of nation-wide youth organisations and regional youth umbrellas based in Berlin. This example of digital participation has evolved over time based on DBJR's guidelines for digital participation.⁶³

Methods

Consultation with young people via the ePartool is structured in 'participation rounds' which lay out the different phases, from an introductory information phase right through to the follow-up stages which outline the (re)actions from policymakers to the contributors. A participation round on the ePartool consists of the following elements:

- ▶ **INFORMATION:** Young people deal with a certain topic locally and in their own way. The ePartool offers background information and methodical help.
- ▶ **QUESTIONS AND INPUTS:** All text, image, audio and video inputs will be gathered online on the ePartool.
- ▶ **VOTE:** On the ePartool, participants vote on the inputs they consider most relevant.
- ▶ **IMPACT:** The voting results are included in the process.
- ▶ **FEEDBACK:** Political stakeholders take the results into consideration and give feedback. On the ePartool, the feedback and concrete measures are directly linked with the inputs.

Everyone living in Germany aged 12-27 is able to use the online tool as an individual, as part of a self-organised group, or for example in a class in school. There is a distinction between single individuals and groups of contributors (like organisations or project groups). Groups receive greater 'voting weight' based on their size.

63. DBJR (2011) [Eparticipation-Participation in and with the Internet](#) a position paper of the German Federal Youth Council regarding eParticipation lays the ground principles for the development of ePartool. The principles on e-participation include: clarity of purpose for the youth participation, adequate time and resources, a transparent process and sustainability.

The project does not maintain records on the numbers and backgrounds of the young people who are engaged in the consultations. It is openly acknowledged that the results arising from the consultation rounds are not representative and may at times be contradictory as they are gathered from young people with a number of different approaches. What is more, the goal is not to be representative but to collect the insights and ideas of young people from a range of different backgrounds and circumstances, and to bring them into the decision-making process.

As well as gathering the views and opinions of young people and young people's groups and organisations, the ePartool has a module that allows the prioritisation of the received inputs, based on a voting system. Once young people have contributed their views, they can vote on the issue or topic using a scale ranging from 'very important' to 'not important'. The outcome of the votes is a ranking which allows DBJR to select the most important issues and to forward them to the decision makers on the national and European levels.

The ePartool thereby links young people's contributions with:

- ▶ how those views and contributions were linked with similar points raised by other young people;
- ▶ how the topics and issues were then voted on by other young people (in terms of level of importance);
- ▶ and ultimately how they were presented to the policymakers and what were the response and outcome.

In order to make it transparent, follow-up reactions, feedback and responses to the original inputs are presented in the format of an interactive timeline. The contributors are automatically informed but other young people can also subscribe to certain topics or items.

Impact

Ichmache>Politik is very concerned with ensuring that the youth participation they support is effective, that young people's views and ideas are listened to and taken into account by decision makers, and that young people who take part in consultations on government policy can discern the influence of their views, ideas and opinions. Follow-up activities are commonplace. In general, within Ichmache>Politik,

the policy development processes are still ongoing with regard to the demographic strategy so it is difficult to accurately estimate the impact on policymaking. However, there is evidence that young people's views have shaped the selection of topics and themes the government will include in the demographic strategy. The project advises that, usually, the political stakeholders deal seriously with the young people's inputs and provide feedback. It was also acknowledged that some policymakers need to be encouraged to do more to recognise and take into account young people's inputs.

The project reports that they regularly ask young people for feedback on the ePartool and the digital participation process. Young people appreciate the use of a system for prioritising inputs (based on young people's contributions) and are pleased that the reactions (from decision makers) and the impacts are now very visible within the software. Participants also value all the information that is provided on the website on the policy topic which, they say, helps them in making informed judgements and opinions. The project claims that this digital approach has a number of further benefits as a method of engagement, including:

- ▶ Young people are free to determine the time, extent and method of their input;
- ▶ The ePartool can document the feedback and impacts of youth participation. Starting from one's own input, it is possible to trace what impact participation may have had;
- ▶ As well as individuals, groups may participate through the ePartool. Thus it offers the opportunity to reflect the positions of youth organisations, associations and other civil society structures.

Lessons learned

The ePartool is ever evolving and has been subject to over five years of refinement. The technology for providing the linking functions (between the young person's contribution, through the voting and onto action and outcomes) has been purposefully developed. One of the main challenges identified by the project is having sufficient time allocated within the policymaking process to support young people's meaningful participation. That is, sufficient time for young people to access information, develop their understanding of the proposals and give their considered views, ideas and opinions.

In addition, the abstract nature of many of the policies decided at a federal level in Germany creates difficulties in seeing where, exactly, the impact of young people's participation has been. That said, the project tries to ensure consistent follow-up and monitoring work and views participation as a process

not a one-off event. Participating in decision making is not always possible within the expected timeframe and the project attempts to have some space to be flexible and also to 'stay for the long course'.

A final lesson learned is that different young people like to be able to participate in a variety of different ways, at different times, in different contexts. Any one young person's preferences may well change over time and indeed, in relation to mood and circumstance. The project claims that the variety of methods used to consult helps to build up the diversity and variety of young people who participate. It is suggested that it is important to play to this strength in any strategy to engage young people, especially those from a range of backgrounds and experiences. The project receives positive feedback from young people on the ePartool but there is also a strong interest in participating in face-to-face workshops run by Ichmache>Politik at summer camps or at youth organisation events or in other ways that are convenient to their particular situation.

Young people value transparency and Ichmache>Politik places a lot of emphasis on this, explaining to young people what it is they are being invited to shape or participate in, why and what might be the outcomes over what timeframe. At the same time, in the view of the project staff, some policymakers need more encouragement to be sensitive to listening and taking into account the views, ideas and opinions of young people.

Reflections on innovation

The innovative or new aspect of the ePartool can perhaps be best understood as the way in which the software has a range of functions that both engage young people and help them to navigate the participation process. Also, the way the ePartool can work in a variety of circumstances, be it engaging an individual young person, a group or a school class and how other offline and online activities complement the tool.

Young people can trace their contributions and see how they are presented and how they impact on decisions. The ePartool has been developed over a number of years with inputs from young people – it started life as an online questionnaire and is now so much more. The project is now exploring (in consultation with young people) how to make best use of the database (of the views and opinions and ideas of young people from across Germany) that has been created over the years. They are already able to build on the statements of youth organisations to inform their positions on certain topics and issues.

The Ichmarche project has now come to an end but the German Federal Youth Council continues its work in the field of participation under the department

of Youth Participation “Werkstatt MitWirkung”. The ePartool is now available for others to use as a free Open Source tool for online participation processes. The user can install the software, and adapt the tool for their own purposes. For example, they can create their own groups, ask their own questions. The tool has been translated into English and is being translated into Arabic, Czech, French, Polish, Russian, Spanish and other languages.

Sources of further information

Workers: IchMache>Politik; kasia.siemasz@dbjr.de
ePartool, tim.schrock@dbjr.de

Websites:

- ▶ The ePartool website through which young people can contribute to the consultation rounds. www.tool.ichmache-politik.de.
- ▶ Website/Blog of the project ww.ichmache-politik.de.
- ▶ The German Federal Youth Council (DBJR) – the project manager and executive body: www.dbjr.de/service/english.html.
- ▶ The development blog for the ePartool; the open source software may be downloaded from there, so that it can be used in other contexts www.tooldoku.dbjr.de.