

“How to build up an organisation” – experiences of Mehr Demokratie

“Never doubt that a small group of engaged people can change the world - indeed it is the only way the world has ever changed.” *Margaret Mead*



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This paper offers an overview about the development and structure of Mehr Demokratie. We learnt a lot about conducting campaigns for direct democracy within the past decades. We describe the basic principles of our collaboration. Our experiences are based on the German background. Please see this paper as a suggestion for organising your work. You have to go your own way.

THE GERMAN SITUATION & MEHR DEMOKRATIE

0. Initiative and Referendum (I&R) in Germany - an overview

Federal Level

Considering the national level in Germany initiatives and referendums (I&R) are impossible. The German constitution from 1919 introduced these tools. But they were not implemented in the *Grundgesetz* (“basic law” – the current German constitution) established in 1949.

Regional Level

Germany consists of 16 states called *Bundesländer* among them are Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen so called “city states”. All of them have the popular initiative. Most states improved these regulations after 1989. Nevertheless the procedure is too difficult to be used by the citizens: Only in 5 *Bundesländer* popular initiatives did ever qualify for the ballot. On average, every *Bundesland* votes once in 45 years on an initiative. Reforms are necessary urgently.

Local Level

In 1989 only the state of Baden-Württemberg allowed its citizens to initiate referendums on the local level. After the re-unification this right was established in the “new” five *Bundesländer*. More and more regional states followed. In 2005 Berlin introduced this possibility as well. Now local referendums are possible all over Germany.

But as on the regional level these legal instruments do not work properly. The only exceptions are Bavaria and Hamburg because Mehr Demokratie campaigned successfully for the introduction and improvement of these possibilities. We initiated referendums bottom-up and got a majority at the ballots. About 200-300 ballots are held in German municipalities every year.

1. Brief history of Mehr Demokratie

- Founded in 1988 in Bonn: A small office in a cellar room; one person working regularly. We started to organise our first campaigns: we connected controversial political issues with the call for referendums.
 - First campaign: “Volksentscheid gegen Atomanlagen“ (referendum against nuclear power plants): We gathered 580.000 signatures of citizens demanding to have a say on this issue.
 - Second campaign “Volksabstimmung FCKW-Stop“ (referendum on FCKW = fluorinated hydrocarbons; the gas which destroys the ozone layer): This time we gathered around 400.000 signatures.

- Afterwards we changed our strategy: Introducing citizen-friendly means of direct democracy by using the existing I&R instruments.
 - Third campaign: "Mehr Demokratie in Bayern" 1993: We started this process in Bavaria because during those days Bavaria had the best I&R instruments on the regional level. We moved our office to Munich and started the popular initiative *Mehr Demokratie in Bayern*. Our target was to introduce the initiative-right on the local level.
 - During the first two years (1993/94) the course of the campaign was quite slow. Most of the time just one person worked in the office. Some people were thinking: "It's a good idea, but impossible to realize." But others believed in it and never gave up.
 - At the end (1995) about 200 local groups and 5.000 volunteers were engaged in the campaign. About fifty organisations supported our initiative (parties, environmental / political / religious groups etc.).
 - In February 1995 we achieved the first major success: about 1.200.000 voters signed the motion within two weeks. The bottom-up initiated referendum was in October 1995: A majority of 60% voted for our proposal. The campaigns did cost about 1.500000 DM.
 - The Bavarians use their new rights: From 1995 to 2005 about 1.400 local popular initiatives were started. More 835 ballots have taken place. The political culture in Bavaria changed (report: <http://www.democracy-international.org/referendumsinbavaria.html>).
 - 1996: Mehr Demokratie decided to continue the work. We established regional groups ("Landesverbände"). Since that time we are constantly making efforts to increase our membership.
 - 1998: Campaign "Mehr Demokratie in Hamburg". 220.000 signed the petition within two weeks. 74% voted for the introduction of the initiative right on the local level.
 - 1998-2000 popular initiatives for I&R-reforms were stopped by legal arguments in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Bremen and North Rhine-Westphalia.
 - 2000: 390.000 voters signed our initiative for "Mehr Demokratie in Thüringen". We started another initiative process in Brandenburg
 - May 2001: Start of our nationwide initiative "Menschen für Volksabstimmung". 79 organisation, representing about 4,8 million members, supported this campaign.
 - 2002 North Rhine-Westphalia: Hurdles for regional referendums were lowered.
 - 2003 Thuringia: The parliament of Thuringia decided for an easement for I&R. This was the result of our campaign in 2000.
 - 2004 Hamburg: Due to a citizen-initiated referendum a new election law was introduced, which gives citizens more freedom of choice with respect to vote on political parties and candidates.
 - 2005 Berlin: On local level the citizens -initiated referendum was introduced by the parliament. Beforehand the *Landesverband* of Berlin worked hard to convince politicians about the advantages of direct democracy.
 - 2006 Berlin: An improvement of the regulations for I&R on the regional level was included in an amendment of the Berlin constitution. Again the *Landesverband* campaigned successfully for a change.
 - 2006 Bremen: The local branch initiated a referendum process to introduce a new election law. In May about 7.000 signatures were gathered - we met the first criteria for holding a referendum. In a second stage we will have to collect another 50.000 signatures. If we will be successful, a referendum on the law will be held.

2. Mehr Demokratie today

Characteristics

- MD is a small organisation based on competence & idealism. We still cannot organize campaigns by ourselves (we aren't an I&R-copy of "Greenpeace"). But we can initiate and coordinate campaigns, if it is possible to build broad alliances.

- We campaign only for I&R and fundamental topics on democracy. We do not support or start campaigns on other topics. We follow the rule of being nonpartisan and independent. Therefore we are able to build broad alliances from conservative to progressive political camps.

Organization

- 4.500 members, 3.100 donators
- 11 regional branches (*Landesverbände*), around 50 local action groups (most small with 1 or 2 persons)
- six offices in Germany, one office in Brussels (with 1-6 people working in each office); in total more than 20 freelancers are working for little money to improve democracy in Germany
- Board of trustees ("Kuratorium") with 40 scientists, politicians, jurists
- All important decisions are made by the biannual membership-meetings and by the elected executive committee ("Bundesvorstand", 9 persons)
- Working groups exist for special issues ("I&R in Europe") or tasks (coordination of our campaigns)

Problems

- Money: I&R is a quite abstract topic. Fundraising is a hard job (we do not have heartbreaking images for promotion)
- Manpower: It is also hard to find competent people who work for little money. Volunteers do a lot of work – but most of them stay for a short period only.
- People: Although about 80% of the Germans want I&R, it was yet not possible to create a broad nationwide movement. In Switzerland and the USA I&R movements were the result of a political and social crisis.
- Courts, Governments: The I&R regulations which we suggest are often ruled out by the constitutional courts: After we succeeded in Bavaria in 1995 and in Hamburg in 1998, a lot of our initiatives were stopped by governments and courts.
- Parliaments: Politicians are hesitating to improve I&R because they fear to loose power. And indeed they will. (But in the long run, they will gain real power.)
- Internal problems: after defeats frustration will rise and internal quarrels will start.

Direct democracy is dangerous, because we ask the question: Who has the power? The ones in power are aware of it and they will fight against us.

CONCLUSIONS – SUGGESTIONS FOR BUILDING AN I&R ORGANISATION

Vision and strategy

- You need a clear political vision (write it down). Your idea for the future provides you with the energy necessary to work on it today.
- We try to be an organisation existing for the vision, not for an end in itself (sometimes this seems to be hard). The goal determines the structure and not the other way around. When the job is done, the structure (offices, people, groups) may also disappear.
- Strategy: You begin to develop a credible and convincing way to get closer towards your vision. Afterwards you start campaigns.

Principles

- Democracy: Practise yourself what you are asking for. Trust in people, democracy works!
- Decentralisation: The regional and local bodies of MD do their own projects and fundraise their own money.
- Responsibility: Everybody who is involved in a project is responsible for it (idea, money, realization). Of course we need teamwork. But the responsibility for certain projects/issues cannot be shared: It should be always clear who is responsible for each task.

- Advice & Help: We help each other as much as possible. Example: If a *Landesverband* (regional group) starts a popular initiative, activists from the whole country go there and gather signatures ("action-holiday").
- Communication
 - outside: communicate positive messages: we deliver solutions, not problems, we show a way that works.
 - internal: communicate as much as you can; take care of your personal relationships, so that you can trust and rely on each other. If somebody talks bad about another person, don't believe it. Always insist on face-to-face communication. If there is an internal conflict which will not end, be careful. Normally, talking frankly about everything and finding a solution solves conflicts. Now something is going wrong, perhaps somebody outside or in your group is interested in keeping the conflict alive.

Competence

- become an expert, know everything about your topic
- work together with scientists (interdisciplinary)
- have the better arguments, educate yourself
- implement internal trainings: teach your activists in theory, rhetoric, fundraising, ...

Manpower

- You need communicative, convincing and inspired people who do the job (one at the beginning is sufficient, two or more is better)
- Vision: choose only people who have an own democratic vision

Organisation

- Build an organisation with clear responsibilities and efficient workflows.
- The main decisions have to be done democratically. Everybody has to agree upon the basic principles. Then start to work. Those people who do the job should make every-day-decisions. Your organisation should work as a group of active people - not as a paper-producing talking club. Of course, discussion is necessary. But before you discuss a project in details, ask yourself if there is anyone who will do it. If not, don't waste your time.
- Look for people who always talk only and those who do the work. I personally don't listen much on critics from people who do nothing. If somebody is active and needs something or has critics, care for him or her. This person wants to enhance something. We are no kindergarten or social club for people who want to solve their personal problems.
- There is a tension between efficiency and grassroots democracy. You must find the golden mean. It works as long as there is confidence in the common goal.

Money

- You need money for every campaign and you will have to work hard for it. Fundraising should take at least one third of the manpower which you invest. Right from the start you should establish decentralized responsibilities for finances. Everybody who starts a project must do the financing him/herself.
- Define a system for the distribution of membership fees. Example: If a regional branch of Mehr Demokratie recruits members independently, they get 2/3 of the money. The rest gets the federal organisation for delivering basic services: administration, membership magazine, materials, presswork etc.
- Every contact you made offers a chance to involve a new person in your work. This is the only way you can broaden your network. These people should trust you and support your work.
- The golden rule: Don't ask people about money but tell them the vision. Money follows action!
- "The working principle of fundraising is asking for money, asking again and asking for more."
- You should build up a database with the addresses of all the people you contacted. This database is the most important tool for fundraising.

Members & sponsors

Give people the choice whether they just want to be one-time donators, regular donators or active members. If somebody wants to cancel the financial support, let him/her go without any obstacles. If possible try to get the permission to use *direct debit*.

Time

Direct Democracy needs time. You want a change of the political system. And you want politicians to give power to the people. This surely is a project for more than one generation.

Be at the right time at the right place, feel where is energy in your society and use it, but never leave your principles and your main topic.

CAMPAIGNING EXPERIENCES

1. a) Our most successful campaigns run on the basis of official regulations. This is very important for the motivation of activists. We were able to promise, when we manage to reach one aim, we can enforce the next step. And at the end citizens, not parliamentarians, decide about our motion.
 b) Look where you can act on the existing regulations for direct democracy and motivate people to use it. Appetite goes with eating. The local level is a good start.
 c) You appeal to the people / citizens, not to the politicians.
2. Decide: You can organize campaigns where direct democracy is connected to a special issue (e.g. referendum on nuclear power) or a *pure* campaign (people demand only referendums). There are advantages and disadvantages for both strategies.
3. Make projects with a defined beginning and a defined end. People want to do something, but they also want to get out again.
4. Build strong networks and coalitions.
5. Work from inside to the outside: first train yourself, then your best activists, then care for the next bigger circle and so on.
6. Use central coordination (strategy, press, material, advertisements), but decentralized organisation. Deliver a good service for the activist, care for people who want to do something. This costs time, but is worth it, you can't do everything yourself. Delegate, don't try to control everything yourself. Your task is to make it possible for other people to work.
7. Motivation: Don't forget to care for your activists when they are frustrated. Spread good news, the bad things they know already themselves. They want to hear from you why their work has a value although you often see only little results. This is hard work for you, (especially when you are not in a good mood) but it has to be done.

CRITERIA / CHECKLIST FOR YOUR ORGANISATION

conformist	liberal, democratic
image of man: homo homini lupus, people are bad and do harm to each other, they must be controlled	image of man: at heart human being is good, capable, reasonable and free

1.	own vision / own energy / own way
2.	democracy / decentralization
3.	diversity / tolerance
4.	self determinism / self responsibility
5.	cooperation, help, advice
6.	own knowledge / own information
7.	free and open communication, transparency
8.	confidence, loyal to your friends
9.	work hard and efficient, be successful
10.	humour, laughing, easy
11.	The ends do not justify the means.

We help with words and deeds...

Don't hesitate to contact members of the Democracy International team. We will assist you to promote direct democracy in your country.

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