

Building Mannheim's SDG strategy around the vision of residents

Instead of assuming what residents want, the city asked them

Christian W. Hübel, City Director for Democracy and Strategy, City of Mannheim

THE PROBLEM: Too many city plans only superficially reflect the vision and expectations of residents.

WHY IT MATTERS: Embedding early on the voice of residents and meaningfully reflect it in the city's strategy increases transparency and buy-in, and upholds the democratic principles of our cities and the SDGs.

THE SOLUTION: Mannheim developed a rigorous participatory process combining dynamic engagement in communities and technology to make residents a central part of its SDG strategy.

In 2008, when Mannheim was exploring the idea of creating a city strategy with the citizens, the experiences of colleagues in other cities showed that creating a dynamic participation process and working out a city strategy with the citizens is a great thing—at least during the development process.

"Don't do it if you are not able to deliver instantly after the process," one mayor warned from experience. Everybody is always energized and hopeful after a big participation process. The obstacle after that is to fulfill the great expectations in the implementation.

In Mannheim, we used the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda as the basis for citizen participation in planning our "Mannheim 2030 vision" for what the city should look like in 2030, in a way that leads to action and change. The integrated framework of the SDGs, complete with specific indicators and straightforward communication, was the best approach for Mannheim to achieve transparency, good governance, and participation while advancing our local goals.

Start simple and go where the people are

The City of Mannheim began with initial surveys and events, asking citizens "Do you know the SDGs?" and then, "Which is the most important SDG for Mannheim?" The aim was to spread the word, but also to elevate how the SDGs framework could work for Mannheim.

We reached out to people where they already were, at public events like our New Year's reception or May Festival, as well as the city's pedestrian zones. It was important for us to go to the people directly. We wanted to hear from people not yet active and participating in city planning, and the ones out of reach from official invitations. This laid the groundwork for the long participation process that followed.

Engage the people with something new

We also tried new instruments, like a photo booth, where residents took pictures of themselves with a sign highlighting their favorite SDG. They could then share the photo on social media and receive a print copy. Young people in particular were enthusiastic about this approach. We also experimented with a lottery system to randomly select citizens to participate in discussions. This approach created a pool of participants more representative and better reflective of the diversity of Mannheim's population. Participants were also more open in the discussion; they did not have an agenda that they wanted to pursue.

In our Urban Thinker campuses, a forum we host in partnership with UN-Habitat and the United Nations Human Settlement Program to promote sustainable development in cities, we create a mixture of innovative presentations by experts, workshops, and cultural events in our congress center. Citizens and experts have open discussions about global issues (migration, climate change, technological change, fair trade, etc.) and their impact on cities, especially Mannheim. This format was well-received, and the quality of the discussions and results were excellent. To make this larger movement a tangible experience for citizens, we have always used large participatory events with over 500 people in a room as pillars of our process. Don't be afraid to try something new!

Creating a narrative

Communication and framing are key to raise awareness and get buy-in from our residents. We share the story with our residents, recognizing that the world is on the edge of crisis and we all have to cooperate to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

On the one hand, we have to localize them for Mannheim. On the other hand, we have to contribute to our global community by asking ourselves what impact our actions have on the environment and people in other countries. We wanted to raise awareness about our city's direct and indirect effects on others (e.g., fair trade, pollutant emissions), and highlight how we can help others directly so that they can achieve

their localized goals (through twin cities and cooperation with other cities for instance). In implementing the SDGs, we are part of a bigger movement. Cities are crucial. To have big goals for 2030 requires activating people and avoiding getting tangled up in the minutiae of everyday life.

Process planning is essential

The participation process to create the "Mannheim 2030" vision took almost two years. To involve as many people as possible, we offered a dozen different formats: opinion polls, interactive one-day workshops on a special topic like gender equality, and exchanges with experts on indicators of sustainable impact management. We always made sure that the results were not endless position papers, but rather were recorded in a predesigned format to make them easier to transfer into the next editing process. It's important to make it clear early on how the results of the discussion are recorded and how they will be easily transferred to the next revision process.

The mayor has to take the lead and support the process

The mayor must signal a total commitment to building the city's vision through a participative process for it to work. Otherwise, there is no traction, no dynamic, and no success. The mayor has to be the face of the campaign, as well as its primary salesman. In Mannheim, the Mayor is a speaker and a moderator in workshops: he speaks directly to many citizens from different milieus of the city. He also guarantees that the results of the process will be integrated into the political process with the city council members and implemented into action.

Trust is key

In the end, we had several themed papers from the workshops and over 1,500 concrete suggestions for measures. But how did we condense them into a "Mannheim 2030" vision and make it clear to the people? How would we translate these suggestions into action? For this, we used an external linguistic agency (LUB-Mannheim). Using language data technology helped identify similar

and recurring topics in the text. We then combined these with the suggestions and theme papers from weekly workshops and inserted them into the Mannheim 2030 vision.

In later conversations, e.g., in the city council, when the vision was discussed, we were able to show exactly which sentences from the workshops were summarized or how each of the 1,500 suggestions was reflected and taken into account in the final document. In this way, we were able to prove that nothing was lost. Not all suggestions or ideas proposed were accepted in the end, but we were always able to trace back how they were processed. Use technology and professional editors!

A step further: Translating the vision into a budget plan

Everyone knows stories about big visions and strategy papers which are created with a lot of enthusiasm but have no effects at all. To fulfill our residents' expectations and implement the results of this two-year participatory process, we integrated the "Mannheim 2030" vision with its seven strategic goals into the budget plan.

In the analysis of expenses and performance accounting, we report how much is spent on priority themes like the environment or schools. We also integrated performance and impact targets into the budget documents, including indicators that relate to the strategic objectives. In this way, the vision is linked to the individual measures for achieving the goals and the respective associated costs. Every year the results are reviewed and can be easily fed into national and global reporting.

For us, the SDGs are a framework and narrative that most easily fosters participation by many residents of Mannheim to develop the city's vision for 2030. The holistic view and integrated approach, combined with evidence-based policy, make it possible for us to get closer to our goals for Mannheim and for the world.