



# Collaborations on open data: Effects on the public administration

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# **Public-civic collaborations on Open Data: Effects on structures and processes of public administration**

## **Abstract**

The aim of the thesis was to investigate the effects of collaborations between citizens and public administrations in the field of open data. The focus was on changes in the existing structures and processes of public administration, which often stand in the way of progress in the area of open data. The collaborations examined in the context of the "Code for Germany" project showed that there are no large-scale changes to the public administrations, instead the basis for future changes is created. The learning effects in the administration, the demonstration of positive benefits of open data, and an increased pressure to act are particularly noteworthy.

## **Context**

In recent years, the concept of "open government" has become increasingly important for public administrations. The intention of the concept is to increase transparency, participation, and collaboration. Freely published and usable data of the public administrations, known as "open data", play a key role and offer the potential for numerous applications.

Despite the German government's ambitious goals of becoming an international pioneer in the field of open data, there are still clear deficits. Research has identified the risk-averse attitude of public administrations toward innovation and the adherence to existing processes and structures as the underlying causes of these deficits (Parycek, Schöllhammer & Schossböck, 2016). As an opportunity for change, special reference is made to the cooperation between the administration and citizens. In this way, cities can work together with citizens who are interested in open data in order to make progress in dealing with open data and to show new opportunities (Mergel, Kleibrink & Sörvik, 2018). To what extent these collaborations affect the processes and structures of the administration is largely unexplored in Germany.

## **Method**

In order to investigate comparable cases, collaborations between people interested in open data and city administrations were considered as part of the Germany-wide project "Code for Germany" (CfG). CfG has created so-called Open Knowledge Labs (OK Labs) throughout the country, in which interested citizens develop applications using open data, but in some cases also closely collaborate with city administrations. For each city, either one person representing both sides (if available) or two individual persons were interviewed, whereby potentially different perceptions could be identified. A total of eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted across nine cities, which made it possible to focus on specific topics (Qu & Dumay,

2011). These included the involvement of citizens, the integration and use of open data, changed processes and the workplaces of the administration. The evaluation of the interviews was carried out in a two-stage coding process, in line with the approach of Saldaña (2013).

## **Results**

### **1. Involvement of citizens**

In many places, the visibility and attention of citizens' participation increased through larger joint projects (e.g. on new systems) and events. Regarding the whole administration, widespread attention to the citizens' participation has so far only been discernible in individual pioneering cities.

The expertise of the OK Labs is increasingly sought after, especially in technical matters, although a permanent involvement of citizens in the work of cities is limited to individual projects or events, mostly due to time and financial problems of such cooperation.

### **2. Integration and use of open data**

The cooperation with OK Labs significantly increased the awareness of the topic of open data, which was still almost unknown in some places. In the first cities, the topic has reached the entire administration and has led to a better understanding in the handling of data, the latter thanks to the mutual exchange. Data sensitization made it possible to reduce the amount of data that is stored multiple times in different departments and the initial skepticism of many employees towards open data.

The (visible) benefits of open data have increased availability in some cities, but there is still room for improvement. Due to the lack of data, there is hardly any use on the part of the cities.

### **3. Changes in administrative procedures**

Overall, there were few changes in administrative processes. Processes were optimized and, in some cases, administrative cultures changed (e.g., regarding digitalization and error culture). In addition to the increased awareness of multiple data provision, the storage and display of data have been improved in part due to learning effects and demands from citizens for more data. Thus, the provision of data is partly automated and access to data is simplified.

### **4. Workplaces of the administration**

The collaborations also contributed to the creation of various jobs, which included promoting the topic of open data in the own administration. Some members of the OK Labs also moved to public administrations as a result of their collaboration, which creates a particularly strong connection between the two partners. Most contacts with OK Labs depend on committed individuals. These often take part in meetings of the OK Labs to exchange ideas or talk about projects. The unusually informal and open exchange for administrations was highlighted positively.

## Theoretical & practical implications

The results confirmed that collaborations promote closer involvement of citizens, although the day-to-day work has remained largely untouched. Especially the accelerating function when converting the work to more open data presented itself as new, since many changes would not have occurred without those interested in open data (lack of pressure to act and positive examples).

Even if the work processes of the public administration have often remained unchanged, the collaboration and the resulting learning effects form the basis for future changes in the administrations. Within the administrations, the added value of special personnel was shown, which takes care of open data and the collaborations. Members of both sides play a crucial role, since an open, informal exchange is made possible and institutionalized.

The accelerating effect of the collaborations on internal change illustrates the need for stronger collaboration. This in turn depends on various factors: better financial support (also to compensate citizens for their expenses) and central contact points for collaborations. The low participation of women and the lack of promotion of better data provision and cooperation with citizens (from the political side) were also noticeable.

## Key Points

The effects of collaborations on structures and processes were reserved. At the same time, attention to open data increased and learning effects emerged, which create the basis for future changes. In order to achieve the ambitious goals in the area of open data, cooperation should be promoted more by politicians. A uniform strategy is currently not recognizable.

Since there are only a few (larger) collaborations so far, it could be easier to investigate the effects of such cooperation in the future. A comparison with other countries is also useful to identify new possibilities to promote collaboration.

## Literature

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