

The Open Planning Process

Public Participation and Stakeholder Consultation in Infrastructure Projects

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Synopsis

In the process of motorway construction Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has become a crucial part of the planning process. For this purpose ASFINAG has implemented the so called "Open Planning Process" to meet the needs of environment, affected people and cost efficiency.

Involving stakeholders and the population affected by the planning and execution of road construction projects at a very early stage has become an essential factor in the acceptance and understanding of road construction. Infrastructure projects need to be carried out in a way that is transparent and easily understandable for lay people, by exchanging information with the population concerned but also by actually involving it in the planning process.

Since 1999 ASFINAG has been drawing up environmental relief measures, together with the population concerned on-site, for the ecologically sensitive areas along the summit level stretch of the Tauern Autobahn as part of the construction of the second tunnel tubes through the Tauern and Katschberg mountains.

Proposals were addressed as part of an iterative process, and the pros and cons of "extreme solutions" such as mile-long tunnels discussed; ultimately this process resulted in an entirely objective approach to what had initially been a highly charged emotional issue. By involving the population in the planning process it proved possible on the one hand to achieve a greater level of understanding among the local communities for the implementability of measures and, on the other, a greater acceptance of the project as a whole. The representatives in the work groups also acted as multipliers in the local communities, which meant we were also able to achieve a more objective discussion throughout the region as a whole.

The view that such an approach simply makes projects far more expensive is essentially incorrect; indeed, nowadays projects are generally planned using other standards with regard to environmental repercussions. The advantage of what is referred to as the "open planning process" is undoubtedly the implementability of projects drawn up in this way and above all the greater acceptance of road construction in Austria as a whole.

One of ASFINAG's objectives has always been to make planning transparent and easily understandable. A whole range of instruments has been established to involve the general public, and these instruments are regularly adapted and modified to suit individual projects. Ultimately the public's participation cannot be achieved using a purely standard programme. Each project imposes different requirements on its promoter. It takes a precise and meticulous analysis of the circumstances and situation on site to bring off the difficult balancing act between successfully involving the population and simply overwhelming it with information.

The Open Planning Process in Infrastructure Projects

as illustrated by the full development of the second tunnel tubes through the Tauern and Katschberg mountains along the A 10 Tauern Autobahn

Implementation of highway construction projects in Austria is an extremely complex, multi-layered issue. Varying processes and requirements arise during the individual phases of implementation (Preliminary survey – Project planning – Construction). The significant difference between these is how the requirements of different environments are considered. For instance, involving affected members of the public during the planning and implementation of road projects is increasingly becoming a key factor for the acceptance and appreciation of road construction.

Infrastructure projects must be realised in a way that is transparent and understandable even to non-specialists – by exchanging information as well as specifically involving the public in the planning process. Ignoring or even completely contradicting the public's needs and anxieties has been shown to have a diametric influence on the chances of road projects being implemented.

Implementing the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as part of the approval process of infrastructure projects is another way of involving affected members of the public at an early stage, but also all stakeholders in the decision-making process become a vital component of the planning process. The intention of the EIA to be an instrument of precautionary environmental protection can only be fulfilled through forward-looking, transparent and understandable planning, with extremely tactful communication.

Overall, communication with all relevant environments in the process of implementing a project is becoming more and more important. How critical the resulting dialogue is for the successful implementation of projects, and which aspects should be taken into account, will be illustrated below.

STARTING POINT

If you take a look at the road construction plans implemented over the past few decades, it becomes apparent that the actual construction of the road takes up a relatively short time in comparison with design and planning. From the first "project idea" to the point at which construction physically begins was and is often a matter of years, in some cases even decades. As well as "trivial" reasons, such as restricted budget flow and similar, three factors are mainly responsible for these distant planning horizons:

- Political dogma against traffic projects
- Local, project-specific resistance to road construction projects at a political, ecological or neighbourhood level
- Unstructured approach (failure to involve the relevant environments)

The points listed have one thing in common: the significance and necessity of communication is underestimated, in some cases the involvement of the relevant environments during project implementation is even denied or largely avoided. The reason behind this is frequently prejudice and misunderstanding of communication, as well as fear of confrontation with those people affected by the project.

In recent years, a number of methodical approaches and guidelines have been devised under the watchword "Process acceleration for infrastructure projects", in which communication-related aspects have also been reconsidered and re-established. From the point of view of a project contractor though, it is not always the acceleration factor that is critical, but rather the need to increase efficiency in all planning processes in order to avoid "frustrated efforts" in both a time and money sense. Devising publicity strategies is becoming increasingly important, and is today an integral part of project planning for road construction projects.

KEY DATA FOR PROJECT-SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION IN ROAD PLANNING

The important question in PR work for particularly complex and sensitive road construction projects is: what characterises high-quality communication with regard to infrastructure? As is so often the case, there is no catch-all answer to this question. From ASFINAG's point of view anyway, certain factors should be

considered relevant to the result – partly because of past experiences with a number of projects (in both a positive and a negative sense):

Making infrastructure planning transparent and easily understandable

Supplying information to and involving not only the public, but also the political decision-makers and the stakeholders, is of primary importance in order to increase acceptance – which is necessary in almost all situations when planning a road link. A proactive publicity strategy is absolutely necessary because of sensitivity to ecological issues. An essential part of this aspect of planning is drawing up the advantages and disadvantages of a project clearly and understandably.

But transparency also means preparing the technical documentation in an understandable way, in a language as free as possible from technical terminology, so as not to be exposed to criticism that tactics of concealment and euphemism are being used.

Treating key persons equally with regard to communication

One characteristic of road planning is the fact that the influence of political decision-makers frequently has a serious effect on the progress of the project. Although this is not exclusively the case, it applies in particular to factors relating to regional politics. A significant advantage of a specialist road company such as ASFINAG is the fact that it is politically independent when it comes to road planning. The constant and detailed information provided by the political decision-makers on the project's progress and risks guarantees that the necessary decision processes are not blocked or made difficult.

Overall, ensuring the quality and quantity of information supplied to the various key persons involved in the planning process is probably one of the most challenging tasks for a project contractor. Qualitatively speaking, presenting the project information in a way appropriate to the target group is essential to increase their acceptance. From a quantitative point of view, a prospective project contractor is constantly walking a tightrope between necessary information and inflationary information overload.

Media work

Potential high-conflict themes such as project planning for new road links are of course highly significant and controversial in a media context too. From ASFINAG's point of view, this means that intensively proactive media work is necessary. Now it is of course possible to accuse various media of not being particularly interested in the issue itself, but of preferring punchy headlines. Nevertheless, looking after the media is also of great importance when it comes to increasing acceptance of road construction projects. Conflict between key people in the decision process (e.g. local residents – prospective project contractors) should however not be covered in the media, firstly because this often contributes towards polarisation of views, and secondly it could have a very negative effect on the overall significance of a project or region. This is particularly illustrated by the example of the planned second tunnels through Tauern and Katschberg on the A10 Tauern motorway: when it comes to planning the necessary strategy to relieve stress on the environment, local residents are repeatedly exposed to the image of hellish traffic noise and pollution in the village of Zederhaus by a daily newspaper. As a result, the village community wants to use this to draw attention to its topographically difficult situation, going to great lengths to use the media to mobilise politicians to take the side of the residents in any environmental negotiations. But at the same time, the region is also intensively orientated towards tourism. Because of this, over-subscription and dramatisation will surely not exactly help to increase the numbers to tourists staying in the region.

Information and participation

As well as information exchange to and from all those involved in a planning process, participation of people affected in planning itself is a communicative challenge for all those involved. In recent years, ASFINAG has had good and promising experiences using the so-called "Open Planning Process".

In order to achieve transparent planning as well as being approachable for local residents, it is important for ASFINAG to work out solutions together with those affected at the location concerned. To do this, local working groups are usually set up. To ensure that a decision can be reached later on, it is important to include representatives from any districts directly affected by the project in the working group, as well as people representing different interests (economic, political, social, ecological), to prevent later mistrust of the decision ("not in my backyard"-type problems).

It is also immensely important for the planning process as a whole of infrastructure projects to involve any authorities who will play an active part in the formal decision process (e.g. EIA process). However, to avoid upsetting the structure of working groups, a tried-and-tested practical approach is to nominate an authority coordinator. This person is responsible for communication in his own sphere of action with other specialist departments, and recruits support for the decision process, depending on what is needed and how far the

project is advanced. For the prospective project contractor, this approach has the advantage firstly that the required communication input is reduced, and secondly that internal communication is optimised.

Another essential factor for the project's progress is limitation of group size, which should not exceed 20 persons, since the group's productivity will be very restricted otherwise. Furthermore, group continuity is also important when it comes to working out suggested solutions, to enable fast, result-orientated working.

It is important that the working group meetings be prepared if they are to be conducted professionally. Each working group meeting should not only be planned and prepared, but the whole process and procedure of the meetings must be organised in the form of a master plan.

The participation of the relevant local authorities as part of the working group (the representative principle) has been supplemented by at least two points in time through planning exhibits (the open day). This makes it possible for the whole population of a planning area to be kept informed of the latest situation in respect of planning and to offer their own suggestions and wishes. The information will be presented in the form of an exhibit and explained by the whole project team (all specialists).

Ideally, the organisation of such a planning exhibition should be carried out only after the review of possible route variations, or after having worked on the route selected (i.e. conclusion of the route finding process).

Although each project is to be planned individually, a fundamental flowchart has been developed by the ASFINAG BMG which contains the following fixed points:

Table: Master plan for conducting working group meetings (basic workflow)

WG Meeting	Content of work	Task WG Member	Input	Output
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation of the project ▪ Presentation of the project team ▪ Expectations of the members of the working group ▪ Explanation of the 'open planning process' 			Knowledge of the project and project team
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation and explanation of existing documents (specialist project fundamentals) ▪ Introduction to the issue of cost-benefit analysis (CBA) and its contents (above all the goal system) ▪ Explanation of CBA with examples ▪ Explanation of the possibilities of working group involvement within the CBA 	Example CBA, supplementing the goal system	Knowledge of the project and project team	Knowledge of CBA
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discussion of the contents of the goal system of the CBA (principally space/environmental criteria) ▪ Explanation of further steps (creating a quantity structure, etc.) ▪ Presentation of the instrument of 'Weighting' 	Complete the 'Weighting' form	Knowledge of CBA	Common goal system for the CBA
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation and discussion of the weighting of the goal system for the CBA ▪ Initial presentation of route variations ▪ Discussion of these variations (map only) ▪ Recording suggested variations from the public 		Common goal system and weighting	Draft of route variations + suggestions from the public
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation of best possible route variations (also longitudinal sections) ▪ If necessary: justifiable reduction in the number of variations ▪ Presentation of the concepts worked out on the measures ▪ Discussion of the contents presented 		Draft of route variations + suggestions from the public	Best possible route variations, concepts for measures

Open Day

Presentation of the current state of developments by the complete project team
Invited: all residents of the planning area

6	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation of each variation subject to a CBA▪ Detailing the proposals▪ Discussion of the contents presented		Best possible route variations, concepts for measures	Variations for CBA
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation of the results of the CBA▪ Discussion of the results with the producers of the specialist contributions▪ Detailed optimisation of the routes▪ Answering special questions▪ Explanation of the procedure of the sensitivity analysis		Results of the CBA	Selected variations
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Presentation of the selected route		Selected variations	Completed initial phase

Open Day

Detailed presentation of the selected route and the results of the cost benefit analysis
Invited: all residents of the planning area

During the work process itself, suggestions are formulated jointly, and the advantages and disadvantages of all conceivable solutions are discussed, which ultimately leads to the objectification of what is to start with frequently a very emotional topic. By involving the public as well as the official decision-makers in the planning process, it is often possible to achieve a higher level of appreciation with regard to planning practicalities, therefore increasing the acceptance of the project as a whole. Since working group representatives also serve as opinion multipliers, it is also possible to achieve objectification of the public debate in general.

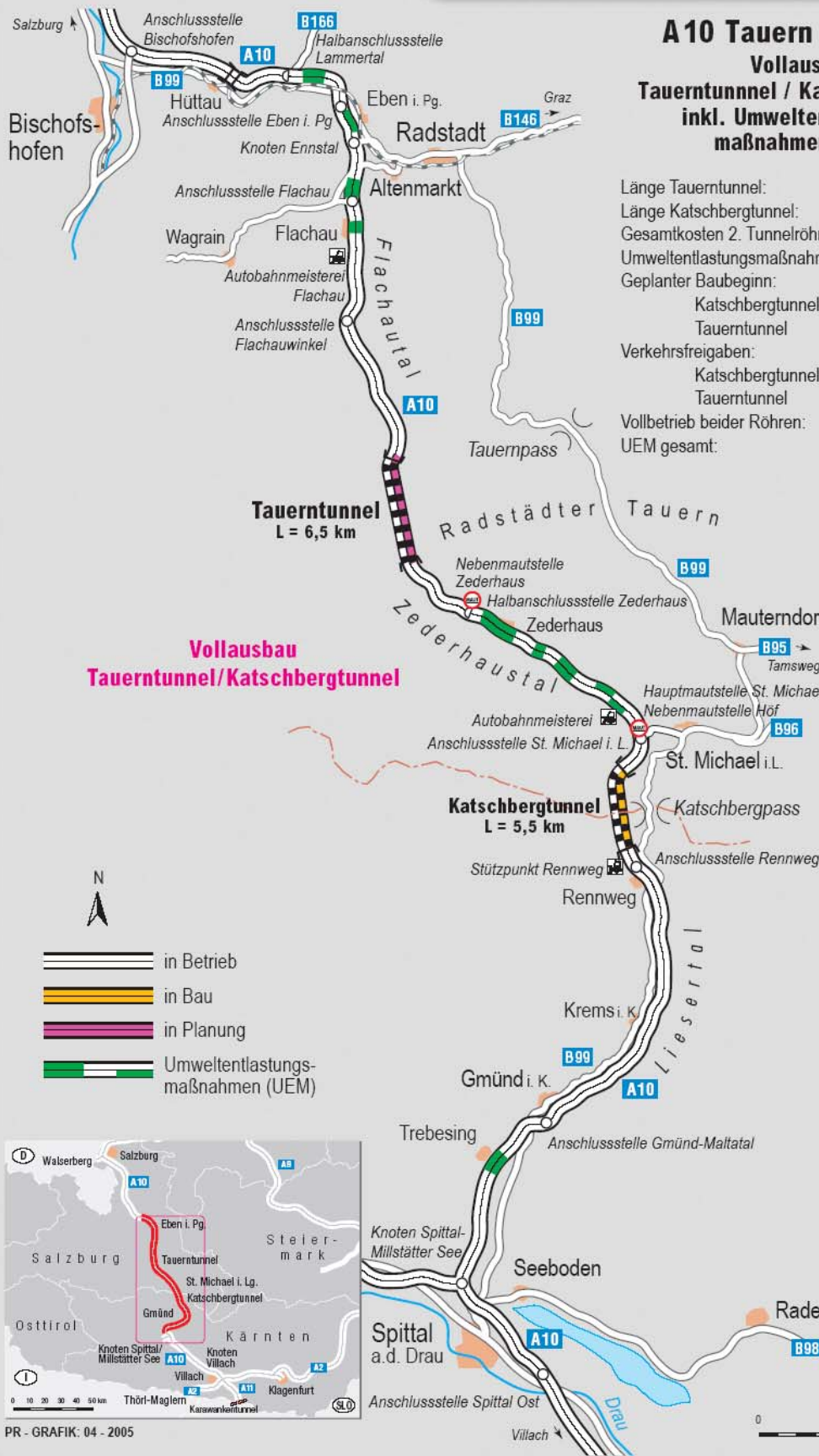
The open planning process as a communication tool however is no guarantee that a consensus will be reached when it comes to implementing road construction projects. But ASFINAG sees this as the way forward for modern road planning involving all relevant environments, which ultimately serves to raise the acceptance of such projects significantly, therefore making road construction in general more transparent and understandable.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE:

The example below illustrates how the open planning process is implemented:

A10 Tauern motorway

From 1999 – 2004, ASFINAG worked together with the affected residents at the summit section of the Tauern motorway as part of the project to build the second tunnel through Tauern and Katschberg, to formulate a strategy to relieve stress on the environment for this ecologically sensitive area.



A10 Tauern Autobahn

Vollausbau

Tauerntunnel / Katschbergtunnel inkl. Umweltentlastungs- maßnahmen (UEM)

Länge Tauerntunnel:	ca. 6,5 km
Länge Katschbergtunnel:	ca. 5,5 km
Gesamtkosten 2. Tunnelröhren:	ca. EUR 280 Mio.
Umweltentlastungsmaßnahmen:	ca. EUR 300 Mio.
Geplanter Baubeginn:	
Katschbergtunnel	Dezember 2004
Tauerntunnel	Dezember 2005
Verkehrsfreigaben:	
Katschbergtunnel	Ende 2007
Tauerntunnel	Sommer 2010
Vollbetrieb beider Röhren:	Spätherbst 2010
UEM gesamt:	Ende 2020

Vollausbau Tauerntunnel/Katschbergtunnel

- in Betrieb
- in Bau
- in Planung
- Umweltentlastungs-
maßnahmen (UEM)



As well as the typical increase in traffic volume on the A10 and the location of the route in a sensitive alpine valley, a distinguishing characteristic of this project is the public's negative attitude to the second tunnel development, which is to a certain extent widespread.

In the event of development, the public fears a high volume of additional traffic, and therefore increased loss of quality of life in their home region. Because of the conflict-charged atmosphere in the villages and amongst the affected residents, there was a high media presence.

In order to achieve transparent and inclusive planning, it was important for ASFINAG to work together with local residents to devise possible strategies to relieve stress on the environment. To achieve this, the first step was to form working groups in all eight villages affected, so that they could work together in an open planning process to draw up a suitable strategy to improve the environmental situation.



Photograph 1: Working group meeting in a neighbourhood community

Suggestions were handled within an iterative process, and the advantages and disadvantages of “extreme solutions” such as tunnel roadworks extending for several kilometres were discussed, which ultimately led to objectification of what was to start with a very emotional topic. This involvement of the public in the planning process meant that it was possible to achieve a higher level of appreciation in the local area with regard to planning practicalities, therefore increasing the acceptance of the project as a whole.

With a project like this, its complexity became particularly apparent once work was started. The communities were encouraged to submit their own suggested solutions for noise reduction strategies. Of course, this involvement in the planning process also means taking on responsibility for joint decisions. Suddenly, residents shift from the relative comfort of criticising a project to being invited to work on it.

The outcome of this planning phase involving the working groups was noise reduction measures along the length of the section – approx. 76 km – orientated to what the public wants, which reduce noise effectively and at the same time are financially viable from a cost-effectiveness point of view for the project contractor.

Despite a few remaining disagreements concerning the extent of the noise reduction installations, public participation in the format shown has achieved its aim with the A10 project. The project contractor's target of shifting the discussion about the extent of noise reduction measures from a highly emotional level to an objective one has been a success. For instance the residents of the village of Zederhaus, which would be seriously affected by the motorway, forewent their requirement for an 11 km tunnel around Zederhaus (technically unnecessary and financially unviable) – not least because of the clear and understandable results from the value-benefit analysis that they worked out together (see photo).



Photograph 2: View of Zederhaus in the direction of the Tauern Tunnel

CONCLUSION

From ASFINAG's point of view, communication during the planning and implementation of road construction projects is more than just fulfilling the specified, legally standardised duty to provide information. It is much more an integrative, key aspect of a prospective project contractor's work, with the aim of constantly reflecting and implementing new and innovative communication approaches.

Good communication is also based on building up trust between the two parties involved. Respecting, accepting and taking seriously all arguments and contributions from all parties involved in the debate requires an open, transparent approach towards the matter. Good PR work may not be a guarantee that road construction projects can be implemented rapidly, but it is indeed a significant factor in the planning process. It may not be possible to "not communicate", as the famous Austrian philosopher Paul Watzlawick once so appropriately said, but the quality of communication is a critical factor for the success of the output – which in this case means the implementation of a road construction project.