

Transforming Neighbourhoods on a Human Scale

Reshaping the city – a top-down or a bottom-up process?

The debate on “Kiezblocks” (similar to the concept of low-traffic neighbourhoods) in Berlin has so far been driven by civil society. Now, the engagement of more than fifty of them has got the new red-red-green government coalition in Berlin to anchor Kiezblocks in their coalition agreement. Even researchers and the public administration are [starting to take the idea](#) seriously. But how does an idea go from a demand to a democratically taken decision, and then to implementation? Are these processes a symbol of participative urban planning, or is their being taken up in the coalition agreement instead a top-down government programme? Does it even matter? In this blog post, we hope to shed some light on these questions.

Claimed spaces and invited spaces

Oftentimes, participation implies that policymakers *invite* citizens to weigh in on a certain issue. The former decide who gets to take part, when and how they participate, and then send out the invitation. This type of process is called an *invited space*. *Claimed spaces*, on the other hand, are processes that citizens or civil society begin themselves.

Despite growing political involvement, in many cases the processes behind the Berlin Kiezblocks can still be seen as bottom-up processes in claimed spaces. Bottom-up means that a process is initiated and shaped by civil society, that is, civil society sets the theme and scope of the proposed change. (You can read more about claimed spaces [here](#) and [here](#), and a deeper analysis of a related example can be found [in this article](#).)

In a claimed space, citizens don’t wait for an invitation to get involved – they themselves take the initiative. Hence, they’re bottom-up. Of course, this can get complicated, for instance when citizens make demands that aren’t limited to only one jurisdiction, or when there is no clear funding available. Take the demand for a safe route to school. The route might involve municipal, state and even federal jurisdiction: the side street the school is located in falls under municipal jurisdiction, the main road under state jurisdiction, and the laws regulating traffic in both under federal jurisdiction.

The idea of claimed spaces can get even more complex if a political actor takes up the demand from a claimed space and starts a top-down process to get citizens involved in the decision. The borders between top-down and bottom-up aren't always clear because when bottom-up initiatives are successful, the authorities have to get involved. When an initiative leads to a resolution, it must be implemented – as in the case of the Kiezblocks. To get a better understanding of bottom-up and top-down participation strategies, let's take a closer look at both.

Top-down processes tend to be set up and steered by policymakers and the public administration. Spaces for participation within these processes are called invited spaces. In invited spaces, policymakers and public administration invite citizens to participate and are in charge of the theme and scope of the participatory process – this is what differentiates them from claimed spaces. Town hall meetings are a good example of invited spaces: the citizens involved don't create the space, nor do they define its content or borders. All of these decisions lie in the hands of policymakers and the public administration. Of course, the borders begin to blur again when a town hall meeting stems from bottom-up processes that were taken up by the public administration.

Kiezblocks "bottom-up"

Kiezblocks are an idea for urban planning that civil society actors in Berlin borrowed from other countries and tweaked to fit conditions in their neighbourhoods. Their purpose is to halt motorized through traffic to improve safety and air quality, as well as to reduce noise and exhaust. One possibility to get a resolution to implement a Kiezblock is by submitting a petition to the local parliament (in Berlin, the Bezirksverordnetenversammlung, or BVV). While the right to move for a policy resolution is generally reserved for members of the BVV, citizens can present policy proposals to their BVV in the form of a *citizen petition* (*Einwohner:innenantrag*). The non-profit Changing Cities e.V. used this channel in their campaign *#Kiezblocks-Kampagne*. In doing so, they showed how to involve interested citizens to get a potential political resolution for Kiezblocks off the ground and into the parliament.

Broadly speaking, the process includes the following steps (though its actual implementation is much more complicated): First, an initiative made up of interested residents (having at least three members or representatives) is formed. Next, a plan for the Kiezblock is laid out. Various participation strategies follow to raise awareness of the initiative among the residents and to encourage them to get involved. Thirdly, the plan is formulated as a petition to the parliament that can either be approved or rejected.

Since most citizens aren't members of the BVV, they aren't entitled to move for a city council resolution, so the fourth step is to collect at least 1,000 valid signatures from supporters registered in the borough. Finally, the petition is handed in to the BVV. The petition can then be approved or rejected, just like a petition submitted by a member of the BVV.

Kiezblocks "top-down"

There are also different top-down processes, including invited spaces, spurring on Kiezblocks in Berlin. For instance, [the Green parliamentary group of the BVV in Neukölln filed a petition for a Kiezblock in the Schillerkiez](#). In the borough of Mitte, a first Kiezblock was started [in December 2021 in the Bellermannkiez](#) – based on the concept of the "[KlimaKiez Badstraße](#)", a project coordinated by the neighbourhood's quarter's management. The authorities are also working on a yearlong traffic experiment in early 2022 in the Komponistenviertel in Pankow.

Top-down processes to implement Kiezblocks can follow different paths. The plan for the Kiezblock in the Komponistenviertel for example foresees reversible traffic diverting measures, based on suggestions made by civil society. The effects of these measures (traffic congestion, safety, environmental and living quality in the area) are currently being researched, analysed and evaluated by universities. Here, an invited space is realised by gathering suggestions from civil society.

In addition to the above experiment, a standardized administrative procedure can also be followed. This includes the following steps (based on a suggestion made by the roads and parks authority in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg): (1) an evaluation of traffic (including the traffic load and a risk assessment); (2) a tangible plan for implementation (the proposal of concrete measures like car-free zones, modal filters, speed limits and protected bike lanes); (3) participatory strategies in invited spaces (second stage of participation: engagement via in-person participation, online questionnaires and representative surveys); (4) followed by implementation steps and (5) continuous evaluation of changes in traffic flows (collection of comments and complaints, areas that could be improved, and setting of guidelines).

Blurry boundaries between top-down and bottom-up – and that's a good thing

Often, it's hard to really tell top-down and bottom-up processes apart. In Mitte, the authorities have taken up civil society's demands for Kiezblocks and [now plan to implement twelve of them](#) in the coming five years. The Bellermannkiez is one of them: this *Kiezblock* *had been demanded* by civil society and the quarter's management (itself a kind of government-supported civil society).

In 2020, civil society actors invited the public and local authorities in Pankow to [make suggestions for Kiezblocks](#). Some policymakers also attended the meeting. Their decision: [a green light for the Kiezblocks](#). A procedure to determine which Kiezblocks will be introduced – and which should come first – was then drawn up by the authorities.

Can a process like this still be considered bottom-up? At what point is it top-down? It's hard to say. As soon as citizens hand over the process, they no longer decide the "what", "where" and "when" of the demands – policymakers steer the process, so it's no longer bottom-up. But the process can also directly result from citizens getting involved in a claimed space when it draws politicians' attention and gains momentum. In the case of Pankow, there are now also top-down processes to implement Kiezblocks. But for some, the transformation they embody is too sluggish, so [some initiatives have now started to file citizen petitions](#). And because citizens – not policymakers – decide how much leeway a claimed space should have, they sometimes [take things into their own hands and reorganize traffic themselves](#). This shows that top-down and bottom-up processes can overlap and interact. In any case, civil society can act as a corrective and use claimed spaces to steer processes taken over "from above" back on track when they take an unintended direction.

In fact, that's the crux of the matter: how can citizens work with policymakers and the public administration both productively and constructively? Although there are some successful examples (like [participatory budgeting](#), which allows citizens to engage in planning public funding), transit and mobility is still a very technocratic domain in Germany, one that is dominated by public administrations and where citizens have only few possibilities to productively get involved in.

That may be a tough nut to crack, but [AKÖR](#) (Anlauf- und Koordinationsstelle öffentlicher Raum) in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, a point of contact linked to the local authorities that is dedicated to changing mobility, is giving it a go. Here, civil society initiatives can come together to reshape public space by facilitating coordinated communication and cooperation with the public administration. More initiatives like this will be needed to implement Kiezblocks in the future. The task could be taken on by



groups like the "Competence Centre for Kiezblocks" Berlin-Mitte (created by a resolution adopted by the BVV Mitte from 19.08.21) or professional forums organized by civil society and researchers that invite representatives from civil society, politics and the public administration. As long as communication between the "bottom" and the "top" isn't broken off, civil society can act as a corrective to stop demands from being watering down.

So, the blurriness – or lack of clarity – between bottom-up and top-down processes here is actually a good thing. It demonstrates policymakers' responsiveness to civil society's concerns. The fact that the content of the concepts related to claimed spaces is being dealt with in a serious and at the same time critical way is a sign that democracy is working – and not just on election day. Instruments like citizen petitions give parliaments the opportunity to include ideas from outside the parliament in their logic and work processes. And obstacles like the collection of 1,000 signatures can add legitimacy to citizens' demands. This responsiveness is a good sign for anyone wanting to participate in political processes beyond election day – and a potential first step toward a participative form of urban planning.