

**Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik
(German Institute of Urban Affairs)**

Occasional Paper

Heinrich Mäding

**Model Cities:
German Experience with Best Practice Competitions**

**Paper presented at the World Conference on Model Cities
Singapore, April 19 - 22, 1999**

The „Occasional Papers“ are a collection of articles in languages other than German that have been written for various events such as conventions and conferences. They also contain summaries taken from selected publications of the institute. All papers of this collection are also available online: <http://www.difu.de/english/occasional/>

The author:

Prof. Dr. rer. pol. Heinrich Mäding
Director of the German Institute of Urban Affairs, Berlin

Distributed by:

Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik
German Institute of Urban Affairs

Straße des 17. Juni 112
D-10623 Berlin

Tel.: +49 (0)30/390 01-0
Fax: +49 (0)30/390 01-100
E-Mail: difu@difu.de
<http://www.difu.de>



1. Competition

The term „competition“ is used primarily in two contexts. In the market economy, competition is the procedure for coordinating supply and demand in markets, driven by the profit motive. In contrast to a centrally planned economy, a competitive economy may be seen to offer the advantages of highly efficient resource allocation, a higher rate of technical progress, and consumer-oriented production. F. A. von Hayek called competition a „discovery procedure“.

This notion applies in the second context, too. In sporting contests or competitions in the arts, individuals measure their performance against one another under the same conditions. Objective measuring instruments (in sport) or subjective evaluation (e.g., by a jury) establish an order of merit and „discover“ the winner or winners. Prize-money and/or intangible goals („honour“) are central incentives, comparable to profit in markets. Competing – even without an economic interest – is a human drive, which in many cultures can be derived from the prevailing values of society.

2. Urban Competitions

In recent years, more and more urban competitions have been organised in Germany – by ministries, associations, universities, foundations. Even where they have not operated with financial incentives, they have usually attracted greater participation than expected. For example, no fewer than 364 towns and cities participated in the „Child and Family Friendly Municipality“ competition organised and staged in 1996 for the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth by the German Institute of Urban Affairs and the Rural Society Association (*Agrarsoziale Gesellschaft*). An optimistic estimate had anticipated 250 entries.

What ends do „suppliers“ and „demanders“ pursue in competitions? What conceptual alternatives are there? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

This paper cannot deal comprehensively with these important questions, let alone offer an international comparison. It is restricted to an account of experience with two competitions in the environmental field staged in Germany, and attempts – with circumspection – to draw certain conclusions about strengths and weaknesses. The account is presented in the confidence that our experience in Germany merits international attention, for comparison with that gathered elsewhere, and, perhaps, for transfer to other countries.

Beforehand, however, a clear distinction must be drawn between competitions and rankings. City rankings are much in fashion, especially in certain magazines hoping to increase their readership.

- The aim of ranking is to establish a clear order among towns or cities. This is usually done by defining, measuring, and aggregating quantitative indicators. Whether participants are aware of the ranking process at all is irrelevant. It can be carried out „behind their backs“ by journalists or researchers on the basis of statistical data and normative rules.
- Competitions are based on an official declaration of intent by the town or city in response to a call for entries. The municipality itself generally collects the relevant

data and presents the programmes. Competitions can also aim to establish a quantified ranking, but need not do so.

In our „Child and Family Friendly Municipality“ competition, for example, a typology of key areas in local government family policy was developed. Municipalities could demonstrate excellence with special achievements in the following four fields:

- Social infrastructural policy, social policy,
- Integrated settlement development,
- Participation and citizen involvement in family policy,
- Integration of family policy in local government administration and policy.

A total of 15 equal prizes were awarded without evaluating fundamentally different elements by a common measure and without establishing a rank order. This displays the broad range of options for action better than ranking, which focuses all attention on a „winner“.

3. Intentions

a) The Organiser

Competitions are mostly organised by public institutions like government departments, for which the prize has an *information function* in their policy area. They indicate their normative preferences in the broad range of possibilities and divergent values, and they show how far pioneers in the given area have actually advanced to date.

In the longer term the competition also constitutes an incentive. Especially if repeated, it encourages entrants to introduce further improvements, and encourages emulation and new, creative solutions among non-participants. It thus generates improvements in performance that are generally impossible or difficult to achieve by other means, for example, by the tools of regulatory policy or financial incentive.

That announcements, interim events, and – as the climax – award ceremonies provide the holders of political office with opportunities for effectively cultivating their image goes without saying, regardless of the constitutional rules of the political system concerned.

b) The Entrants

Towns and cities participating in competitions will accept the outlay (primarily the time spent by officials on research, coordination, and presentation) only if it appears to be outweighed by the utility of the exercise.

The prime benefit is the image value of gaining a good place; best of all, of course, of winning an award. In the competition between cities and regions to remain attractive for residents and established industry and to lure newcomers, and possibly tourists, success in a competition can serve as an indicator for the quality of local government policy with regard to how it benefits the environment, whether it caters to the needs of children and the interests of the general public, and how innovative it is. It saves more costly advertising campaigns.

Competitions among public authorities, which generally do not compete in the market place, also have a benchmarking function, evaluating them in relation to one another.

Participation can also trigger learning processes in administration, prompt new cooperation structures, and can thus be an element of administrative policy. Similarly, depending on the conception of the competition concerned, mobilisation effects for the general public can play an important role, as for example in one of the oldest and best known German community competitions „Beautifying Our Village“ („*Unser Dorf soll schöner werden*“), which is concerned with improving the outward appearance of small communities.

It is not surprising that the personal interests of leading politicians – such as re-election – become involved. Only in exceptional cases is the prize-money itself high enough to be worth striving for.

4. German Experience: Two Urban Competitions in the Environmental Field

- a) „The Federal Capital of Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection“ („*Bundeshauptstadt für Natur- und Umweltschutz*“) is the title of a competition organised by the German Environmental Aid (*Deutsche Umwelthilfe*) and sponsored by the German Federal Foundation for Environment (*Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt*). It ran from 1990 to 1998, for over 9 years. The aim was to establish an annual ranking of German towns and cities in nature conservation and environmental protection and to disseminate innovative solutions.

The competition was open to all German communities (N = ca. 15,000). Between 1990 and 1998, the towns and cities listed in table 1 participated.

Table 1: Competition „The Federal Capital of Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection“

Year	Entrants	„Winners“
1990	30	Erlangen
1991	96	Erlangen, Nettersheim
1992	152	Freiburg
1993	138	Nettersheim
1994	185	Eckernförde
1995	144	Bad Oeynhausen
1996	189	Heidelberg
1997	199	Münster
1998	223	Hamm

The basis of assessment was a questionnaire with about 100 mostly „closed-end“ questions, for example „Has the municipality begun to elaborate a ‚Local Agenda 21‘“? or „What proportion of households are not connected to the central sewerage system?“ This questionnaire was divided into 10 (slightly varying) question areas. In 1998, for instance, they were the following:

1. Local Agenda 21
2. Environmental planning/settlement planning
3. Nature conservation
4. Agriculture and forestry
5. Waters
6. Water/waste water
7. Transport
8. Energy
9. Procurement/allocation/refuse
10. Public relations

Exemplary measures in each category could be cited.

The answers were evaluated on the basis of an open, predefined point system and condensed into rankings of towns and cities by question area and overall. Essentially, the aim of the competition was thus to obtain a ranking. The results were published, supplemented by examples of „best practices“ selected by experts from the cases reported by the participating towns and cities. The return for participants was primarily the benchmarking function, and for well placed entrants the image value as well. The questionnaire has also served small and medium-sized communities as a basis and structuring principle for their own environmental programmes.

- b) „Scene of Action: Communities in Ecological Competition“ (*„TAT-Orte: Gemeinden im ökologischen Wettbewerb“*) organised by the German Federal Foundation for Environment and the German Institute of Urban Affairs. This competition was planned by our institute and is being staged by us for six years from 1995 to 2000, financed by the Foundation.

The aim of the competition is to discover and publicise exemplary environmental projects (of action groups) or comprehensively planned strategies (of local government authorities), which are also significant from both the economic and social point of view. Whereas the „Federal Capital of Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection“ competition can be seen almost exclusively as a ecology-oriented event, the later competition seeks to take appropriate account of economic and social goals, as well – in keeping with a more comprehensive interpretation of sustainability in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio Conference.

Entitled to enter were all local government authorities and action groups from communities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (N = ca. 5,800) in the new federal states, i.e., the former East Germany. This geographical restriction is justified by the great need of these eastern communities to catch up in environmental policy. Table 2 shows the number of local authorities and action groups that have participated in past years. The number of prize-winners is also shown.

The basis for evaluation is a questionnaire with a few „open-end“ questions, such as „What basic idea underlies your environmental protection activities?“ or „What economic, social, and cultural impact have your activities had? What effects do you expect in the future?“ Comprehensive details are to be supplied.

Table 2 Competition „Scene of Action“

Year	Entrants			„Winners“		
	Authorities	Groups	Total	Authorities	Groups	Total
1995	25	24	49	3	1	4
1996	38	22	60	4	1	5
1997	49	31	80	4	1	5
1998	34	31	65	3	5	5 ¹
1999	57	49	106	-	-	-
Total	203	157	360	14	8	19 ¹

1 In three cases awards were given to entries submitted jointly by a local authority and an action group (registered association, limited company).

Evaluation is in two stages and is qualitative. First, a project team of researchers inspect the entries and prepare a short list. About twenty local authorities and action groups are visited by small groups composed of project team members. Then an interdisciplinary jury of researchers and practitioners make a decision, in which the commitment of authorities, citizenry, and associations receives particular attention, and self-help is recompensed. Account is taken not only of whether a measure has been taken but also how, with what effect. The reward for prize-winners is primarily image enhancement.

- This includes the honours of an award ceremony and treatment in an elaborate, widely distributed book publication.
- A short video film is shot, which is made available for public relations purposes, etc., etc.

For the remaining entrants, the reward is primarily internal mobilisation. There is no explicit benchmarking. Participating local authorities also appreciate the opportunity to exchange experience, to obtain advice from the institute, and to attend specialist conferences.

5. Summary Evaluation in 7 Theses

(1) Urban competitions meet with considerable interest – even if they are not endowed with substantial prize-money for the „winners“. Important preconditions are topics that are „in vogue“ in local government policy, reasonable costs, a reliable organiser, and good public relations work by the latter. In Germany, the support of local government umbrella organisations is an important prerequisite for attracting a satisfactory number of entrants. If competitions are repeated (annually), interest in participating grows rather than wanes. Participation is often triggered by the encouraging experience of other local authorities. The competition gains reputation by word of mouth. Municipal authorities are urged to enter – also by the political opposition or citizens' action groups. Anyone who fears comparison from the outset can't have good cards!

(2) Initial interest in entering a competition is aroused by expectations; continuing interest depends on experience of how well the competition serves the specific intentions of the entrant („utility“). In any case, the nature of the competition procedure, which must seen

to be high-grade, is crucially important. For some purposes (e.g., image effect in a ranking), a prediction that the city will do well compared with others plays a role. But a contrary forecast can also encourage participation if, for example, executive levels are interested in mobilising a self-satisfied administration.

(3) As these two examples alone show, competition procedure can differ in a broad range of aspects. For example, there can be substantial differences in the following variables:

- breadth of topic
- quantitative vs. qualitative approach
- ranking
- publication strategy.

(4) Breadth of topic

A competition needs to clearly address a definable topic (with a favourable image!) such as „nature conservation and environmental protection“, „child and family friendliness“, or „administrative reform“; but this can mean that other important concerns of local government policy fall by the wayside. The inclusion of social and economic aspects in the „Scene of Action“ competitions is meant to broaden the horizon for entrants and jury. But it must be remembered that such additional criteria act in effect as additional filters, and narrow the field of eligible competition entries. If too much is demanded, no entrant can keep up; the conditions of entry prove a deterrent. A balance must be found in each case, establishing an optimal set of requirements.

(5) Quantitative – qualitative

Competitions intending to obtain a full ranking of a very large number of communities rather than merely choosing a few „winners“ will have no option but to apply quantitative procedures. Otherwise it will be impossible to ensure openness and objectivity and thus gain and retain the confidence of entrants.

To some extent quantitative data can easily be obtained from official statistics (e.g., rate of car ownership), but some require elaborate studies (e.g., species diversity); sometimes they are directly relevant for the environment (e.g., CO₂ emission rates), sometimes only indirectly (again, rate of motor vehicle ownership). When measurement data or qualitative statements are transformed into points (classes) and then aggregated, this raises the transformation and aggregation problems well-known to indicator research. Subjective „political“ decisions are needed if green spaces with clean water on the one hand and unpolluted foods on the other are to be rendered comparable and summable. Critics speak of pseudo-precision or even arbitrariness.

But if project evaluation is „only“ integral and qualitative, and this evaluation is transformed by jury resolution into a decision on a „winner“, the openness and „objectivity“ of the procedure can be called into doubt. There is no general solution to this dilemma. Whoever wants to record states in nature can operate better with quantitative procedures, and produce acceptable rankings. Whoever wishes to reward social processes and political/administrative achievements (taking differences in local conditions into account) will

not be able to avoid qualitative arguments. The jury discourse replaces the computer evaluation program.

(6) Ranking or „winners“

As we have shown, the objective prerequisites for the two concepts differ. The value of ranking for the information function is obvious. If only „winners“ and „non-winners“ are designated, a great deal of information is lost. Winners do not know who is „the best“, „non-winners“ do not know whether they just failed to achieve their aim or whether they were wide of the mark. They should in any case be given this information, naturally in diplomatic form.

Besides the difficulties we have described in obtaining rankings, a prime disadvantage of this procedure is its motivational impact. Badly placed entrants will tend to criticise proceedings. Whoever drops in rank compared with the previous year, despite intensive effort, will tend to be frustrated and curtail their efforts. To this extent the „merciful fog“ of the winner procedure possibly has a greater incentive effect and causes less conflict in interpreting the results. However, it does not permit benchmarking in the narrower sense of the term.

(7) Publication strategies

Publication strategy is less important only for the benchmarking function of a competition; for all other functions it is crucial. A reasonable proportion of the total competition budget should therefore be reserved for the high-quality communication of the results. Above all, it must be comprehensible in detail, too, if it is to serve directly as a reservoir of best practices. The more fully and interestingly the commendable strategies and projects are presented, the more likely it is that the competition will be a vehicle for disseminating good ideas and improving local government policy or local activities as a whole. For the „Scene of Action“ competition, not only a comprehensive book and calendar with high-quality layout have been produced, but also a set of video films and a touring exhibition. The attractive presentation of such best practices in the Internet is now a central element of publication strategy, which has the additional advantage of being particularly inexpensive.

(8) Special attention must be paid to the correctness of explanations in competition materials. In the „Federal Capital of Nature Conservation and Environmental Protection“ competition, only spot checks were generally made of local authority statements, and, to some extent – in the case of well-placed entrants – additional checks by local environmental groups. In the „Scene of Action“ competition, inspection of the community by the travelling project team as well as interviews and discussions are important steps in securing the information base.

(9) Summary

- The urban competition is an effective policy tool, which usefully complements regulatory and financial instruments in selected policy areas.

- There is a broad range of competition types, each with its strengths and weaknesses, and each of which is better or worse suited to satisfy the intentions of organisers and participants.
- In diffusing good practices, they contribute to social progress. Especially competitions that do not concentrate on determining an „ideal city“, which then monopolises all attention, but those that reward and recommend a variety of endeavours can achieve the best results in a turbulent world and in the face of differing local starting conditions.