

How can civil society representatives influence local social policy? Political participation of senior representatives in municipal elderly care policies in East and West Germany – a voice perspective¹

Ralf Och, Universität Hamburg

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Contact:

Ralf Och
University of Hamburg
School of Business, Economics and Social Sciences
Welckerstraße 8 (Room 1.12)
20354 Hamburg
Email: ralf.och@wiso.uni-hamburg.de

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Abstract

Research question

Political participation of citizens is “at the heart of democracy” (Verba et al 2002: 129). Eastern Germany is often considered to have a weak civic society compared to the Western part of the country (Probst 2003). The paper questions this thesis by analysing the political participation of senior representatives of four middle sized German cities and asks how the differences between the Western and the Eastern cases can be explained.

Theoretical frame

Political participation is seen as the expression of voice according to Albert Hirschman’ concept and will be measured by two main dimensions: the participatory rights of the senior representatives and their actual involvement in local policy making.

Methodological approach

The analysis is based on 38 qualitative interviews with local experts and relevant political actors as well as the analysis of minutes of the social committee (1995-2007) of the four cities - two Western and two Eastern cases. The selection followed a similar case strategy. The data have been sampled during the project ‘the local restructuring of elderly care- cultural bases, actors and conditions of action’, funded by the German Research Foundation.

Findings

It turns out, that the Eastern senior representatives have similar or even more participatory rights than their Western counterparts. Moreover they are considerably more involved in the local policy-making. This somehow surprising finding can be explained mainly by the different character of the civic engagement of the senior representatives in West and East. While the Western senior representatives are more focused on their own target group and less active and less politicised, the Eastern ones are quite active, act broader and more cooperative with the local state. In doing this they provide some useful implementation resources for the local politics. Seniors’ councils clearly can influence local social policy in particular with respect to voluntary activities arranged by municipalities. However, while they are successful in influencing local policy discourses by giving impulses for new developments, their ability to block political decisions is rather limited.

Introduction

The welfare-state reforms of recent decades have led to a pronounced economisation and marketisation of social-welfare services (Evers und Heinze 2008; Le Grand 1991; Bode 2005), and the beneficiaries of social-care services are now referred to as ‘customers’ (Eichler und Pfau-Effinger 2009; Vabø 2006). Does the controlling power of market mechanisms thus make ‘citizens’ and their participation in policy decisions expendable, since decisions over various offers are now taken more often ‘with the feet’ and no longer by ballot or through engagement in political parties and committees? Not at all, for the introduction of *choice* has not ended the political conflicts over resources and expenditure-levels of public budgets (Clarke 2006). Rather, even though users assume the role of consumers when they (must) choose between competing offers, they also as citizens exert influence over the offer and its regulation (Ewert 2012; Clarke und Newman 2007). It can thus be argued that social markets have not replaced citizens and clients by consumers – though for certain a new distribution of tasks or weighting of the roles has taken place (Clarke 2006).

Two possibilities for action as citizens are immediately obvious: voting in elections and demonstrations of public opinion in more or less informal and temporally limited contexts. Recent examples are demonstrations over the controversial ‘Stuttgart 21’ construction project in that city, the protest actions over German nuclear-power, or the ‘Occupy’ movements that have been suddenly thrust into the focus of public attention. A third possibility is longer-term political engagement in organisations such as political parties or those representing interests of groups in civil society.

This contribution deals with the political involvement of senior-citizen representatives in local social-welfare policy, and in particular, local care policy. Senior citizens are a relatively heterogeneous but now rapidly growing group of the population that is still not often in the focus of public attention. To give older people a greater political voice might seem to be a central task in an ageing society (Naegele 1999), since this group represents, as an electoral as well as cost-factor (Künemund 2001, p. 71), a ‘central target-group of politics’ and wields increasing ‘latent political power’ (Schmidt 2009, p. 273). The latter is exercised not only through elections (‘individual voice’), but also through ‘collective voice’ (Haarmann et al. 2010, p. 217), that is, voice through ‘interest representations’ such as the senior-citizen representatives analysed here. These are the politically non-partisan, confessional and otherwise organisationally unbound representatives of the interests of the (somewhat imprecisely defined) ‘senior’ life-stage, in confrontation with government administration, politics and all other relevant actors (Eifert 2006; Roth 1997). Ideally it is through them that (senior-)citizens’ role as users of the provision social services is realised.

Local authorities are an appropriate level for examining the realisation of the citizen role, because locally the consequences of overall societal trends are visible and at the same time localities offer citizens the possibility to ‘intervene directly in the process of political consensus- and decision-making’ (Burchardt 2007, p. 8). Even if local decisions do not have the weight of regional or national decisions, they can in sum still considerably affect local conditions in the lives of citizens. At the same time local levels are the place where ‘users’ as citizens, clients and consumers encounter the state’s services – be it through public institutions or the market – and their regulation.

This contribution investigates three questions: (1) What room for manoeuvre is there for senior-citizen representatives in local social policy making? (2) In what areas of local social welfare policy do senior-citizen representatives exercise 'voice'? (3) and finally: What objectives do senior-citizen representatives pursue in their involvement with local social-welfare policy? To answer this I refer to the concept of 'voice' as put forth by Albert Hirschman (1970).

In the following I first present the study's investigative framework and then show how the concept of 'voice' functions in political contexts. The fourth section sketches some of the areas of action suitable for the exercise of voice by local seniors representatives; sections five and six examine the objectives they have in the specific areas. The last section summarises the results and identifies generalisations that can be made.

Study framework²

The three study-questions are here exploratively answered on the basis of the comparative case-studies of four medium-sized (pop. 75–100 thou.) German cities. These case-studies were conducted as part of the DFG (German Research Foundation) project 'The local restructuring of elderly-care – cultural principles, actors and basis for action'.³ Two of the cities lie in the West and two in the East of Germany; the criterion of their choice was to be the most similar possible to the others ('similar cases' design) with regard to size, pressure of the ageing population and the size of the local budget. City W 1 lies in Hesse, W 2 in Lower Saxony, O 1 in Thuringia and O 2 in Saxony-Anhalt.⁴

In total 38 interviews with experts on local politics and civil society were carried out and evaluated on Mayring's criteria of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2008, 2000). Among these were all the top city social-welfare department officials⁵, all chairpersons of city-parliament committees on social-welfare, the administrative officials responsible for local care policy in the cities, as well as further politically relevant local actors such as care providers or senior-citizen representatives. Beyond this, the valid institutional regulations for senior-citizen representatives, as well as the minutes of parliamentary social-welfare committees for the period 1995-2007 were content-analysed in order to gain an understanding the development of senior-citizen relevant topics and the participation of the senior-citizen representatives in these policy-debates.

² I thank especially the coordinators of the thematic issue in the *WSI-Mitteilungen* Florian Blank, Benjamin Ewert and Stephan Köppe, as well as my department colleagues, particularly Prof. Dr. Pfau-Effinger and Dr. Patricia Frericks for their valuable suggestions.

³ The project (*Die lokale Restrukturierung der Altenpflege – kulturelle Grundlagen, Akteure und Handlungsbedingungen; the local restructuring of care for older people – cultural foundations, actors and conditions of action*) was carried out at the University of Hamburg between March 2006 and June 2011 by the author in cooperation with Melanie Eichler and under the direction of Prof. Dr. Birgit Pfau-Effinger. The aim of the project was a comparison of local care policies in four East- and West-German cities Pfau-Effinger et al. 2012.

⁴ One of the study cities agreed to participate in the study only under the condition that it not be identified by name, which request was of course respected.

⁵ Except in W 2; the responsible Social-Welfare Department official during the study period could not be persuaded to be interviewed and directed us to an administrative employee.

Voice in political contexts

Originally Hirschman posited his concepts of 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty' to show how unsatisfied customers can behave towards the providers of goods and services. He differentiates first the two basic mechanisms: 'exit' and 'voice'. 'Exit' means simply that unsatisfied customers can seek a new provider who offers an equivalent product – the 'classic' market mechanism. If however an equivalent provider is not available, or a change would cause (higher) costs, then 'voice' – the demonstration of dissatisfaction – can be a reasonable alternative: to cause the provider to improve their product. 'Voice' is thus an eminently political mechanism (Hirschman 1970, p. 15). The probability that voice instead of exit will occur depends on the degree of loyalty towards the provider, which Hirschman models as a function of exit options, or costs. Thus loyalty depends on the calculation of what advantages switching providers would bring. Without exit options – the possibility of switching providers – there can also be no possibility of voice, since ultimately the expression of dissatisfaction is only taken seriously if a possible departure can be made plausible.

In political contexts the degree of loyalty understood this way is naturally high, because exiting a political community in the rule brings significant costs and besides, the effects of political actions can often not be avoided anyway (Hirschman 1970). Voice in political contexts is [also] costly, success is uncertain and often requires long-term engagement (Crouch 1995, p. 67). Whether users behave passively and accept the negative effects of policies, or on the other hand become active citizens and exert voice (Rokkan 1974, p. 49), fundamentally depends therefore on how they assess the 'trade-offs' between the disadvantages of the existing or future policies and the chances for success at changing them (Hirschman 1970, p. 77).

Areas of action where local senior-citizen representatives can exert voice

What room for manoeuvre is available to local social politics in the federal structure of Germany, and how can users – here in the form of senior-citizen representations – take part in the formation of local social policy?

Though the major outlines of social-welfare policy in the Federal Republic of Germany are stipulated at the federal and state (*Land*) level, local social policy has its own legal status within the framework of the constitutionally guaranteed self-administration and is a 'fundamental concern of the local community and an independent local policy-area (Backhaus-Maul 1994, p. 529). Within it there is the distinction between two central task-areas (Backhaus-Maul 1998; Dahme und Wohlfahrt 2011b): tasks mandated by law and/or tasks which the federal or *Land* levels have delegated to local authorities, and optional tasks which fall within the legal framework of self-administration. As to the mandatory tasks, local social-welfare policy is above all implementation policy, with more or less freedom of action (Dahme und Wohlfahrt 2011a, p. 395). As to the optional tasks, the local authorities can be 'socio-politically active to a practically unlimited extent' (Roth 1999, S. 3), with however considerable constraints imposed by available resources (Dahme und Wohlfahrt 2011b). Backhaus-Maul (1998) sees the freedom of local authorities to make social-welfare policy in defining of the amount and standards of quality of the required social service provision, as well as the shaping of the provider landscape and the provision of social services. To follow

Pabst (Pabst 2002), the various tasks of local social-welfare policy can be divided into five groups of measures:

- planning
- infrastructure measures
- maintenance and improvement of the quality of social-welfare services
- the pricing of social-welfare services
- information and advisory services

As at the federal and *Land* level, local social-welfare policy takes place in three political arenas: in public, in city parliaments and city administrations (Pitschas 2000, p. 130). In local political decision-making processes in Germany, above all the city parliaments and administrations are central, while public discourse is mostly of lesser importance (Backhaus-Maul 1998, p. 699; Knemeyer 1995).

In these arenas are active three main groups: representatives of local (party-) politics, administrative actors, and the very heterogeneous group of civil-society actors. Politics has through its budget-making rights a veto position, while the professional administration are presumed to have a head-start in terms of knowledge over the mostly unsalaried local-level politicians.

Among the group of civil-society actors also belong senior-citizen representatives.⁶ Seniors representations were constituted in recent decades in all parts of the country and on all political levels (Mayer 2000). In her article on senior-citizen representations in North-Rhine-Westphalia Barbara Eifert (2006, p. 268f) describes four central tasks that can apply to all local senior representations: cooperation in local planning; advising political bodies, administrations and elderly-policy actors; guiding and advising older people, as well as public-relations work.

On the local level senior-citizen representations are mostly optional bodies – local authorities can, but don't have to establish them.⁷ As interest representations that are institutionalised, their possibilities for exercising voice are accepted by political actors because these (have to) recognise their legitimacy, or also have a particular interest in doing so. They can be more or less formal or informal; how far their formal 'voice-exercising rights' go beyond those of 'normal citizens', is an empirical question.

There is however a great breadth of formalised voice-exercising rights, as Barbara Eifert (2006) shows for North-Rhine-Westphalia. Also between the cases examined here, the differences are considerable. All the investigated senior-citizen representations are at least represented on the parliamentary social-welfare committees without a vote. Beyond this lowest common denominator, the senior-citizen representatives in locality O 1 have the strongest 'voice-rights'. They have within the political decision-making processes comprehensive petitioning and information rights, and their statements require the city

⁶ Among these are for example 'senior-citizen boards' (*Seniorenbeiräte*), 'senior-citizen councillors' (*Seniorenräte*), 'senior-citizen delegates' (*Seniorenbeauftragte*), 'senior-citizen committees' (*Seniorenausschüsse*), 'elderly council' (*Altenrat*), 'elderly board' (*Altenbeirat*), 'city elderly circle' (*Stadtaltenring*) (Mayer 2000).

⁷ The senior-citizen representative groups studied here were accorded their official rights to 'voice' by each of the city parliaments, since there is no nationwide regulation of participatory rights, and – except in Schleswig-Holstein Vanselow 2000, S. 123 – also none at the *Land* level.

parliament (council) or administration to react within a legal deadline. Somewhat weaker can be considered the voice-rights of the ‘Senior-Citizen Board’ in locality W 1, who are supposed to participate in all senior-citizen matters, but in City Parliament however have only the right to be heard but not to make proposals that obligate Parliament or administration to reply. At a similar level are seniors’ voice-rights in locality O 2, which in contrast to O 1 are however limited to participation on the parliamentary Social-Welfare, Culture and Education Committee. The participation of ‘Senior-Citizen Delegates’ in O 2 in administrative procedures, because of an organisational connection to the Social-Welfare Department of the city, seems to be greater than senior participation in city W 1. The least voice-rights has the senior-citizen representation in W 2, since it can have only one delegate on the parliamentary Social-welfare Committee, who has there the right to speak but no right to petition, and only a very vaguely formulated access to information about administrative processes.

Socio-political areas in which voice can be exercised

The formalised voice-rights are however only one side of the coin; their actual realisation is the other. The first question to be addressed therefore is, in what areas senior-citizen representatives exploit their voice-possibilities to influence local social-welfare policy⁸ in the study cities.

Exercise of voice in the area of local planning

The focus of local social care planning shifted with the introduction of national care insurance in Germany in 1995/96. While before 1995 the aim of local care planning was to obtain information for the regulation of coverage of care need and its pricing – ‘classical’ elderly-assistance planning (see Klie und Pfundstein 2008) – today it is more a moderation of planning processes of multiple actors in support of innovation, networking as well as the observation of the market, for example by means of promoting infrastructure development and care conferences (Klie und Pfundstein 2008, p. 7). However, one of the cities studied (O 1) conducted no planning measures in these policy areas during the study period.

In W 1 the creation of a new elderly-assistance plan was one of the central measures taken in the senior-citizen policy of the city; the Senior-Citizen Board was, however, only marginally involved (see below). City W 2 conducts yearly two or three ‘care conventions’ (*Pflegekonferenzen*) that serve care market observation and above all the treatment of quality-relevant topics such as dementia care or group-living concepts for seniors, and in which the senior-citizen representatives – if only passively – take part (Social-Welfare Dept. of W 2, Director of Elderly Care). City O 2 had, after the introduction of the national care insurance, two local elderly-care plans in which senior-citizen representatives were involved (see below).

Voice in local infrastructure measures

Because of their financial dimension, infrastructure measures belong as a rule to the more important ones within the social-welfare policy of communities. With infrastructure is meant here the buildings housing the institutions and the substantive/organisational profiles of these (inpatient, day-care, ambulatory or special care such as for dementia and other conditions).

⁸ The limitation to the field of social-welfare policy – and in particular, care policy – excludes of course other important fields of senior-citizen policy such as traffic- or transport-related, or cultural policy-areas.

The four study cities maintain as an optional task six to ten ‘senior-citizen centres’ where advice is offered to seniors on various old-age-related topics such as care issues, housing, or help from charity organisations or the senior-citizen boards themselves, as well as cultural events. Where these are operated by the local welfare associations⁹, they receive a subsidy for overhead and personnel costs. The senior-citizen centres in the two West-German cities were apparently never controversial. City O 1 succeeded in transferring the cost of its seven senior-citizen centres, which for a longer period of time had been financed in equal parts by the city and the *Land*, into the city budget without cuts (see below). Furthermore the local authority there supports the training of senior-citizen assistants. In O 2 – in connection with the discussion over cuts in the social-welfare budget – the need for its total of eight senior-citizen centres was called into question. The administration succeeded however, together with the senior-citizen representation and some of the city’s politicians, to save them (parliamentary Social-Welfare Committee minutes, O 2 2002). The O 2 senior-citizen representation provided the impetus for senior-citizen assistant training and also coordinates the work-assignments of these.

The German ‘Care Insurance Law’ (*Pflegeversicherungsgesetz*, SGB XI, § 8) obligates each *Land* and local authorities to assure an appropriate local care infrastructure. To do this, these can partly finance for providers the costs of expansions or renovations of care-homes, who in return for a certain time are not allowed to pass on this part of the cost to the care-needy. Only O 2 had the possibility to distribute itself the funds of the *Land* foreseen for this purpose. The funds were advertised for bids of the care providers and in the ‘proper democratic way’ (Direction, Social-Welfare Dept. of O 2) brought through the committees. The city achieved the goal supported by the senior-citizen representatives of engaging almost 45% of the then-available beds for ten years at a lower price (on average 40% lower than the official ‘Care-Level I’ price) (Direction, Social-Welfare Dept. of O 2).

Except for W 1, all the cities were maintaining their own residential care homes. The smallest of the three residential homes in O 2 closed in 1998 because a needed renovation was too costly. The main negotiation parties in this were the City Council, the responsible city departments and personnel representatives. The Senior-Citizen Board however pressured the parties to allow the home’s residents in their existing living groups to be distributed among the two other city homes. These two larger homes were renovated with federal and *Land* funding and sold at public auction in 2000 to local social-welfare associations. The Senior-Citizen Board argued without success for the sale to one bidder who favoured a dementia-friendly living arrangement (O 1, Elderly-Assistance Planer, minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee). The Senior-Citizen Board members in O 1 and O 2 involved themselves further in the expansion of sheltered living facilities, which in both the East-German cities is a much bigger topic than in the West-German ones. City O 2 owned (at the time of the study) a care home that was also to be sold, but which after a drawn-out discussion remained in city hands. It was extensively renovated and specialised for dementia care. Also here the deciding actors were City Parliament, the responsible city departments and the staff council. The senior-citizen representatives, though only marginally involved in the discussion, supported the dementia-care orientation. Senior-citizen representatives here were also in favour of setting up

⁹ Traditionally in Germany operate six big welfare associations: German Red Cross, Diakonisches Werk (protestant charity); Arbeiter Wohlfahrt (AWO, Workers Welfare); Caritas Verband (catholic charity), Deutsche Partitatische Wohlfahrtsverband (German Parity Welfare Association) and Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland (ZWST, Jewish charity).

a day-care centre for persons with dementia and achieved the incorporation of this aim into the planning agenda. A further process, at the time of the study still incomplete, was the institution of a hospice in the city, which was largely an initiative of civil-society forces (social-welfare umbrellas and other organisations) as well as of the senior-citizen representatives, and which the city also strongly favoured.

Voice in structuring the prices of social care services

Influencing user prices for social-welfare services is easiest for the cities when they provide them themselves as optional tasks (i.e. not mandated by federal or *Land* law): The use by citizens of the above-mentioned senior-citizen centres was free of charge in all the study cities. Cities usually cannot influence much user-prices for mandated tasks, as the example of care services shows: German long-term care insurance as a ‘partial insurance’ pays only some of the costs, and the care recipients have to pay the rest. Though the cities have a genuine interest in low prices – since they have to pay for social-benefit receivers (see above) – at the same time they have only limited negotiating powers, since in all the cases observed the long-term care insurance benefits are set by negotiation commissions at the *Land* level; an exception are the above-mentioned investments, in as far as these can be negotiated at the city level.

In W 2 the public actors have adapted the rules for public funding of investment cost so that older facilities became somewhat more economical. Furthermore the city negotiated with the long-term care-insurances that two facilities with special dementia care should get higher care payments, so that they do not become more expensive for the care needy in comparison to other facilities. The Senior-Citizen Board was not involved however at any time. In O 1 the Senior-Citizen Board worked for a long time but unsuccessfully for not only a social-welfare-recipient public transport ticket, but also for a reduced-fare seniors’ ticket (see below). Locality O 2 was able, as already mentioned, for a certain period to limit the costs of residential care through public financed investment subsidies.

Exercise of voice in the area of social-welfare service quality

Of central importance is care quality, in all professional care arrangements as well as in assisted living where seniors may need supervision. However the relevant legal regulations (above all the *Sozialgesetzbuch* (SGB) XI, or ‘Social Law Code’, and the *Heimgesetz* or ‘Care-Home Law’) have given localities little authority for intervening to regulate the quality of service performance in care work, since for this the *Heimaufsicht* or ‘Care-Home Supervision’ and the *Medizinische Dienst der Krankenkassen* (MDK), or ‘Sick-Funds Medical Service’ are officially responsible. Local authorities can however make available additional funds for relevant measures to improve care quality.

City W 2 since the 1980s has had an institutional discourse on care quality, and moreover it is the only city in our sample in which the ‘Care-Home Supervision’ (*Heimaufsicht*) is a city authority and thus can intervene to regulate quality at least in residential care. But the Senior-Citizen Board there hardly took a position in the discussion about care quality or anything else during the study period. In O 1 the Senior-Citizen Board is very active and seeks for example to establish partnerships with residential institutions in order to function as an adequate channel of communication for the residents through the ‘care-home councils’. Moreover it was the board that made public the only ‘care-scandal’ (see below) in the city. As mentioned, the senior-representation in O 2 supported the dementia-care orientation of the city care-home

not least because it considered the quality of caregiver-training, especially for dementia, to be insufficient.

Voice in the area of local senior-citizen advisory services

Advisory services are a central task of senior-citizen representatives (Eifert 2006, p. 267) as well as local authorities. As the following description shows, both were engaged in the offer and realisation of a very broad range of services.

A central advice centre where citizens can get all information surrounding care from one source, was set up in W 2 in cooperation with social-welfare umbrella associations, though the senior-citizen representation is only marginally involved in its operation. The other three cities have decentralised their senior-citizen advice-centres thematically and/or geographically. In W 2 the Senior-Citizen Board, in agreement with the administration, has added to the city-wide network of advice-centres a telephone advice hotline for seniors. In O 1 the Senior-Citizen Board organises together with the city the ‘Senior-Citizen Days’, a yearly series of events in which practically all actors in the city involved with seniors meet and explain their activities. In addition there is a ‘Join-In Day’, the ‘Senior-citizen Guidebook’, ‘Seniors Newsletter’ and the ‘Dementia Guidebook’ – all organised in cooperation with the city. The situation is similar in O 2, where seniors representative together with the city and the Senior-Citizen Board organise the yearly ‘Senior-Citizen Week’ and produces a ‘Senior-Citizen Guide’. Beyond this the senior representatives during the study period brought out a position paper and submitted a petition to the government of the *Land* of Saxony-Anhalt and the Federal Ministry of Health (see below).

Summary

Senior-citizen representations exercise ‘voice’ in practically all areas of local social policy. The main areas in the cases observed here, as shown in Table 1, are in the areas of infrastructure measures and quality assurance; this is however also dependent on which socio-political issues are most emphasised in each locality.

Senior interest-group objectives in the exercise of voice

The following section now asks about the objectives of the senior-citizen representations in the exercise of voice. Here it is less a matter of the effects which are actually achieved – that analysis would require a much more detailed account of the influence of other actors than is possible in the framework of this contribution. Rather, it is here above all a matter of the intended effects, which are measured by three indicators:

- To hinder local decisions or change their orientation. Here senior representatives try to prevent outright an existing or planned measure, or alter its character or extent.
- To provide new impetus. Here the senior-citizen representation tries to encourage new ideas or measures, regardless of the ultimate success of the effort.
- To strengthen existing impetus. The senior-citizen representatives try to give support to existing or planned measures.

Table 1 - The objectives of voice in local senior-citizen representations in social policy making

	Decisions prevented / changed	New impetus given	Existing impetus strengthened
Planning			O 2, W 1 Senior-citizen assistance planning
Infrastructure measures	O 2 Number of senior-citizen centres O 1 Cost of senior-citizen centres	O 2 Hospice O 2 Training of senior-citizen assistants O 2 Day-care for dementia	O 2 Dementia-orientation of municipal care-home O 2 Investment costs subsidies O 1, O 2 Assisted housing O 1 Training of senior-citizen assistants
Quality		O 1 user friendly re-locating care-needy persons after home closures O 1 Care-quality scandal	
Prices		O 1 'Senior-ticket'	O 2 <u>Investment subsidies</u>
Senior-citizen advising		O 1, O 2 'Senior-Citizen Days'	W 1, O 1 Senior-citizen guidebook
Advising the political process		O 2 Petitioning at the <i>Land</i> and federal parliament level	

Table 1 summarises the areas in which senior-citizen representatives exercise voice, as well as their objectives. For reasons of length I cannot discuss in the following all the 'voice activities' visible in the table, only selected cases which reflect the spectrum of activities, and beyond that, a cautious interpretation of the reasons for the success or failure of these instances of voice.

Decisions prevented or changed

An example of the prevention or change in the direction of a local decision is the above-described case of the financing of the senior-citizen centres in O 1. Before the expiration of the *Land*-level financing of 50% of their costs in 2004, the city's 'elderly-assistance planner' together with Social-Welfare Department officials and the Senior-Citizen Board brought about the assumption of the full costs by the city authority.

There came a point in my time in office in the Social-Welfare Department, when we just doubled the sum we were seeking; in a moment of inattention the City Council didn't even notice we were asking for more money (former Social-Welfare Dept. official, O 1).

The decisive role was played however not by the Senior-Citizen Board, but rather by the city administration and Social-Welfare Department direction. Since senior-citizen representatives have no voting or even veto rights on City Council, they always need the support of actors in politics and usually also in the administration. Also in the second, above-mentioned case in

the discussion over reducing the number of senior-citizen centres in O 2, the senior-citizen representatives depended on the support of the parliamentary Social-Welfare Committee (minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee, December 2002).

New impetus

In 2005 in one of the for-profit residence homes in O 1 occurred the scalding of two residents through maladjusted shower heads. The Senior-Citizen Board heard of the incident and informed the Social-Welfare Department and the local press. Further, it petitioned for the case to be brought before the Social-Welfare Committee (minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee, December 2005).

The matter was brought to light by the Senior-Citizen Board. In O 1 there is a good contact network. As soon as some undesirable development appears, it becomes public, not only through the press, but also through advisory boards, for example the Senior-Citizen Board which is as we know very active and functions very well in O 1. And then in a very short time the matter goes to the Social-Welfare Committee and is put on the order of the day for discussion. We invited the concerned parties and held a small hearing. At least we did it that way with the representatives from the home, the care facility, and the quality-control authority – what's it called? – the MDK (Chairperson of the Social-Welfare Committee).

The result was that the care-home operator agreed to take quality-control measures and prepare a report about them. The case is remarkable because the Senior-Citizen Board succeeded in activating the local authority to secure care quality, a matter in which local authorities as a rule do not have official responsibility. In the other study, those cities without a residential home supervising authority (W 1, O 2), the local actors have also pointed to their own lack of legal possibilities for intervening in such cases.

An example of attempts to influence the prices of social-welfare services is that of the Senior-Citizen Board in O 1 to introduce a reduced-price 'senior-citizen ticket' in that city. Initially it managed to win over the parliamentary Social-Welfare Committee to the idea. The proposal failed ultimately however on the objections of the local public-transport confederation which pointed out that it contradicted the principle of equal-treatment of passengers as set forth in the 'Law on the Transport of Persons', and that a 'Social-Welfare Ticket' already existed and was used by around 300 of the city's retirees (minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee, May-August 1996).

The seniors-representation of O 2 submitted during the study period several position papers or petitions on current senior-relevant policy questions at the parliament of the *Land* Saxony-Anhalt and at the federal parliament – that is, above the level of local politics. Particularly interesting is its 2007 petition to the federal parliament on behalf of the reform of the national care insurance, because it had obtained for this the support of the local Social-Welfare Committee. The senior-citizen representation argued in the petition for greater support of prophylaxis, strengthening the skills of family carers and an improvement of training in caring occupations including continuing professional training. Dementia should, they wrote, be covered by the national care insurance and the obligation to demonstrate care quality should be extended to providers' offers of supervised housing arrangements (minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee, April 2007).

Strengthening existing impetus

Elderly-assistance planning projects are a local task and a fitting occasion for the exercise of voice on the part of senior-citizen advocacy bodies. However voice, as the next two examples show, can be exercised very differently by senior-citizen representatives.

The renewal of elderly-assistance planning was one of the biggest measures undertaken in W 1 during the period of our study. The key participants were representatives of local politics, municipal administration and social-welfare umbrella organisations working together in the ‘Steering Group Elderly-Assistance Planning’. The Senior-Citizen Board was not a member of the steering group, but was from time to time informed about the state of planning without having an active part in it.

... elderly-assistance planning is very much controlled by politics, ... there is also always money involved. Today ...decisions are no longer taken, to put it plainly, according to need or demand – only budgets count (Director, Advisory and Coordination Office).

By contrast, the senior-citizen representatives in O 2 were from the beginning actively involved in the formation of the city’s elderly-assistance plan, together with a range of other actors such as the ‘Delegate for Disabled Persons’, the ‘German Elderly-Aid Board’ (*Kuratorium Deutsche Altenhilfe*), the city’s Social-Welfare Office, City Planning Office and others (minutes of the Social-Welfare Committee, May 1997; ‘Care-Structure Plan’, *Pflegestrukturplan* 1999, 2001).

As the above already well-described local advisory activity also shows, voice, as a strengthening or support of local government measures on the part of senior-citizen groups, can be of very different dimensions.

Conclusion

This contribution examines three aspects of user-participation in the form of senior-citizen representations: the room for manoeuvre these have in local-government social policies, the areas of local social policy in which they exercise ‘voice’, and the objectives they have in doing so.

Because of their position as ‘extra-parliamentary interest-representations’ (von Alemann 2000), senior-citizen interest-groups depend on their being conceded voice-rights by local politics – which has led to the considerable differences observed among the study cities. Also, they sometimes can be in conflict with other interest groups, which can narrow further their room for manoeuvre – but that is not a focus in this paper. Above all in the optional (non-mandated) tasks of local governments, because of the great autonomy of responsibility of localities have for social-welfare policy, there are good possibilities for civil-society interest-organisations like seniors-groups to exercise voice, as the above-given examples largely show. For what concerns mandated tasks by contrast, the room for manoeuvre of local interest-representations depends on the varying stipulations of legislatures.

Senior-related local social policy often consists of comparatively modest issues that can however have considerable effects on the quality of life of the persons concerned and might be quite contentious in city parliaments and administrations (Eifert 2006, p. 269). From my contribution results that seniors representations exercise voice in practically all senior-relevant areas of local social-welfare policy. The cases observed have their main emphasis

distinctly in the area of local infrastructure; the senior representatives exercise voice less often in such areas as social-service quality, planning, or the prices of social-welfare services or advisory services.

Voice is strenuous and uncertain in its outcome (Hirschman 1970; Crouch 1995). The results of this study confirm this, also in as far as the potential of local senior-citizen representatives to hinder decision-making is rather slight. To have greater influence would require formal rights in the decision-making process which are lacking – and justifiably so in democracy, considered from a theoretical standpoint. Besides this, public discourse, because of its lesser importance at the local level – in contrast to the *Land* or federal level – seems less useful for exercising influence. Whenever local seniors representatives do succeed in finding sufficient support in politics and municipal administrations, they can, as the local senior-centres in O 1 und O 2 show, decidedly assert their own interests. The results of my study suggest that the real strength of senior-citizen representations lies in their potential to bring new impetus to local social-welfare policy. For its transformation into actual benefits for seniors however, they are again dependent on the support of actors in local administration and politics.

To summarise: Senior-citizen representations in their civic role can influence local social-welfare policy in particular in areas of non-mandatory tasks of local government. For the transformation of that influence into positive outcomes however they will always need the support of the local administration figures and political forces.

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