

## Society needs to join forces to meet contemporary challenges – the case of Germany <sup>1</sup>

By Reinhard Wagner

Challenges are piling up at all levels of society in Germany. For example, manufacturers and suppliers in the automotive industry have to cope with serious structural change; connecting rural regions to the high-speed broadband network and creating affordable housing is putting local authorities under considerable pressure, especially during a period of increasing home office utilization; the transformation of the country's energy system with the phasing out of nuclear power and coal requires innovative concepts and a new infrastructure at local, regional and national levels; and finally, digitization is not only causing trouble for executives in the private and public sector, yet it's proving to be the weak point of the German education system in times of Covid-19. If it weren't for the discussion about the distribution of the scarce Covid-19 vaccine, you'd almost think it was business as usual in this country.

After the initial praise at the beginning of the pandemic about how well Germany had got the virus under control, there is now more "Schadenfreude" and allegations of failure. What is going on in the land of poets and thinkers, of "German engineering" and organizational genius? Germany has become ponderous, complicated and cumbersome. Instead of acting boldly and providing an app to track and display contacts with infected people, we continue to discuss the requirements of data protection and the conceivable restriction of personal rights until we finally - at the end of the first wave - have an app that practically does not work and people no longer trust.

While a start-up company (Biontech) in Germany develops the world's first vaccine against Covid 19, demonstrating the inventive spirit and innovative strength of the local economy, the vaccine is first approved and used in the U.S. and in the UK, and the ordering and distribution of the vaccine in Germany is the cause of a scathing review in the press and the subject of numerous talk shows. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen finally admits to mistakes in vaccine procurement and states, "the EU is more of a tanker." The list of these undesirable developments could be continued arbitrarily.

However, the question of the causes seems much more interesting to me. What has already crystallized in the failure of major projects - such as the Berlin Airport - can also be observed in many other areas. This is the dichotomy in Germany between the private sector, which is experienced in delivering projects, and the public sector, which (still) has little experience in conducting large-scale projects. I would like to emphasize here that the private sector still has a lot of ground to make up in terms of project management, and that smaller companies, especially those with an agile structure, have an advantage here. Nevertheless, companies benefit from the fact that they have to coordinate closely with their customers in global competition and respond to frequently changing

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requirements. That only those survive who are innovative and, in addition to sophisticated products, are also professional in the realization of corresponding projects - classic or agile in their approach, with all opportunities and risks involved, and with the full commitment of everyone participating.

In a macroeconomic survey of project activity, the GPM German Project Management Association already pointed out in 2015 the serious gap between the private and the public sector. In the private sector, more than 40% of working time is spent on projects that serve to create new products and services or solve challenging problems. The public sector manages just half of that. A recent study on the "projectification of society in Germany" shows a similar picture. Increasing complexity, digitization, pressure to innovate and social tasks are named as challenges and main areas of application for professional project know-how, but the corporate world is clearly ahead of all other sectors in this respect. This dichotomy is increasingly becoming a problem in Germany.

For example, it is not enough for Germany to spend a lot of money on research and development of vaccines, but not to think about the production to logistics and delivery of these substances, to plan them in time and to effectively manage the realization of the projects. In this context, the procedural models of project management - whether classic, agile or hybrid - long known in the business world can be used with the support of organizational forms such as a project management office (PMO) as well as qualified and often also certified project managers. In a new form of "public-private partnership PPP," companies can prove how serious they are about contributing to the common good in Germany and support the public sector as well as civil society in the realization of projects.

The public sector must become much more familiar with the know-how required for the realization of demanding projects and invest even more in the qualification of its employees. Above all, however, it must make itself much more adaptable in order to be able to respond more quickly to rapidly changing conditions or new challenges. It is not a question of more complicated procedures, bureaucratic processes or elaborate tools, but rather of "[common] sense, honesty and ingenuity," as Daniel Defoe put it as early as 1697 in "An Essay upon Projects".

However, I also want to emphasize that the public sector has important capabilities for projects and programs that are particularly important in times of crisis or to overcome challenges. The public sector's mandate, for example, provides it with power, influence and resources that can be deployed immediately. In the event of extraordinary situations, the military, police or the disaster response force can also be mobilized. This has been shown, for example, especially in the pandemic, to bring helpful relief in many situations. The military in particular is often able to take over the organization and logistics for which no provisions have been made in normal times.

Moreover, I would like to bring a third, and very important, sector into play, namely civic engagement. Even if the understanding and know-how for the delivery of projects is still very weak here, it has been shown, especially in Germany in critical situations, that this sector should be involved from the outset for crisis management. For example, the assistance provided by the civil population in the event of serious flooding in Germany

or in dealing with the 2015 refugee crisis was a key success factor. Above all, the spontaneous response of citizens, their creative problem-solving ability, intrinsic motivation and self-organization helps unleash forces that neither the private nor the public sector could deploy. However, this also requires citizens to be made aware of the necessary capabilities for delivering projects and to recognize that it is not just the government that is responsible for tackling problems, but all forces in society together.

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## About the Author



**Reinhard Wagner**

Germany



**Reinhard Wagner** has been active for more than 35 years in the field of project-related leadership, in such diverse sectors as Automotive, Engineering, and Consultancy, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. As Managing Director of Tiba Managementberatung GmbH, a leading PM Consultancy in Munich/Germany, he supports executives of industrial clients in transforming their companies towards a project-oriented, adaptive and sustainably successful organization. Reinhard Wagner has published 36 books as well as several hundred articles and blogposts in the field of project, program and project portfolio management. In more than 20 years of voluntary engagement he served the German Project Management Association (GPM) as well as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in a range of leadership roles (including President and Chairman) and was granted for his international commitment with the Honorary Fellowship of several IPMA Member Associations. He was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow in 2021.

Reinhard is Senior Lecturer at the Alma Mater Europaea and is currently finishing his doctoral thesis on the topic of Project Society. He can be contacted via [reinhard.wagner@tiba.de](mailto:reinhard.wagner@tiba.de).