26

CONSULCON

DAY 2 - 10:45 - Main Stage

Democracy Starts Local:
Why Participation Matters More Than Ever

KEYNOTE + Q&A

ROMAN HUBER - Mehr Demokratie

Session recap

At a glance

Roman Huber, director of Mehr Demokratie and one of the people involved in founding the CONSUL project and Foundation, gave a non-technical keynote built around the VUCA acronym (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous). He focused on two letters. Uncertainty produces fear and stress, which populists exploit by offering people an external enemy. Complexity requires a new way of making policy based on rough consensus, learning loops and the participation of everyone affected. He illustrated his points with Mehr Demokratie's 'Speaking and Listening' dialogue format, which has scaled rapidly in Germany, and ended with a new definition of power as the ability to design intelligent collective processes.

Key messages

- Nobody foresaw today's world eleven years ago, when CONSUL started: far-right gains in eastern Germany, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and fears about AI.
- Uncertainty is ultimately fear, and permanent stress makes people look for relief. Projecting the cause onto an outside enemy brings real, physical relief, which is why it works politically.
- Politics is about values, values are always tied to emotions, and suppressing emotions makes them easier to manipulate. Naming emotions makes rational discussion possible.
- The world is not complicated (one right solution) but complex. Wicked problems such as housing, climate, poverty and democracy need iterative processes: rough consensus, experimentation, feedback loops and stakeholder involvement.
- Collective intelligence can make a group smarter than its smartest member, or dumber than its dumbest (a mob). Facilitation and well-designed processes make the difference.
- Power should be redefined: not power over others, but the ability to create intelligent processes into which everyone can bring what they know.

Facts, figures and references

- Mehr Demokratie's 'Speaking and Listening' (Sprechen und Zuhören) format: groups of four, four minutes each, three rounds of the same question, about 40 participants per event.
- About 1,800 facilitators trained and about 1,000 dialogues held in roughly 18 months. The format has also been exported to Canada.
- Anecdote from a small town in Brandenburg where a Social Democrat and an AfD member met in the same dialogue group.

Takeaways for the community

- Participation practitioners should design processes that make space for emotions, not only for facts and arguments.
- Facilitation capacity is a core democratic infrastructure, as important as digital tools.
- Iterative policymaking with feedback loops is the appropriate response to complex problems, and platforms like CONSUL DEMOCRACY can support it.