

LiFT Case Book

Hosting Collaboratories: Insights and learnings from different cases

Editors: Iris Kunze, Elke Fein



3. LiFT Collaboratory in Rastatt, 2016

By Elke Fein

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LiFT Collaboratory in Rastatt, 2016

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Hard facts:

<i>Date:</i>	24.1.2016
<i>Place:</i>	Rastatt/Germany, Theatersaal, Reithalle
<i>Participants:</i>	55, partly citizens from the region of Rastatt, partly also members or sympathizers of the hosting political party (ALFA) which came from more distant places in Germany
<i>Initiator:</i>	Dr. Elke Fein (LiFT), in cooperation with host
<i>Host:</i>	Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformers (AECR), Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch (ALFA), both political parties
<i>Topic:</i>	the refugee crisis
<i>Facilitators:</i>	Elke Fein (project manager), Dr. Thomas Uhlendahl (hired professional, lead facilitator)
<i>Duration:</i>	4 hours (9.30-13.30h)

Preparation (contact with host, engagement and time resources):

The host left most of the preparation to the initiator and facilitator, giving support with logistics when needed. While the host was hardly involved in substantial preparation, an intensive preparation process occurred between the design & facilitation team (the two facilitators) and the local stakeholders.

Character and facilities of venue:

A large bright conference hall with room for 500 people and professional catering outside the main room during breaks.

Degree of familiarity of host and participants with collaborative process work: medium

Degree of familiarity of participants with each other:

many were part of the larger community of the host, though not necessarily familiar with each other (good basic level of mutual trust in the network)

Degree of expertise of participants about the topic: medium, interested, rather well informed citizens

Specific Resources: experience and knowledge of the facilitation team, catch box for icebreaker.

Specific challenges:

- The host being a political entity in times of campaigning made it difficult to include a broad, non-biased range of stakeholders;
- a large part of the participants somehow related to the network of the host (thus preventing more diversity in terms of political attitudes)
- unfamiliarity of large parts of the audience with collaborative methods as used here

Positive impact:

Most participants experienced the Collaboratory as an inspiring, eye-opening, transformative event, and many gave feedback that this was the best conference of the host they had attended so far.

Main learnings: The host should not have a stake in the topic. The more they are perceived as independent, the broader a range of stakeholders they can mobilize. Yet, in a setting where participants are not familiar with collaborative approaches, less diversity among participants can be helpful to generate trust and cooperation.

General introduction

This Collaboratory was not part of the LiFT project, but rather held by one of the LiFT team members, Elke Fein, on request of the local host.

The Collaboratory was held on Jan 24, 2016, as part of a two-day conference focusing on “the refugee crisis as a touchstone of the European Union (Die Flüchtlingskrise als Prüfstein der EU)”, which arguably was the most burning issue of German politics at the time, just shortly after chancellor Angela Merkel had opened the borders to a high number of refugees who would likely not have made it to Germany on the basis of the then valid Dublin agreement of the EU.

The Collaboratory took place on the second day of the conference, after a first day of expert presentations, looking at the topic from various disciplinary and cultural perspectives. The context and setting of day one were characterized by a more conventional conference format, which could be considered as an extended downloading phase though, since most of the participants of day one were also present on day two.

A. Context and preparation of the Collaboratory

Hosting organization and network of actors involved

The most striking and most specific feature of this Collaboratory in terms of both the context and the facilitation design it required was its host – which, in turn, also determined the kind of participants that were attracted to the event.

The host of the overall conference were the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformers (AECR) and its German cooperation partner, Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch (ALFA). Both are¹ political parties (the latter a German one, the former an association of political parties on the level of the European Parliament). While the host happily accepted the project manager’s suggestion to organize the second part of the two-day conference as a Collaboratory, it is clear that collaborative, cross-cutting stakeholder involvement methodologies are not the usual way of cooperation in current political contexts, nor in most of the hosting individuals’ daily political work. Rather, the latter are used to work within – and practicing highly competitive (zero sum) logics, where political actors try to gain public support at the expense of their competitors.

The Collaboratory was an attempt to introduce those involved in the hosting field to more collaborative logics of doing politics, at least to give them a sense and first experience of how more collaborative, less competitive forms of political cooperation around a complex challenge and of designing politics in view of sustainable solutions could look like.

While this idea was generally hailed and supported by the hosting organizations, they also viewed the event as part of their campaign in view of the upcoming regional elections (on March 13, 2016).

¹ More precisely: were, since ALFA has later been re-named into Liberal Conservative Reformers (LKR).
<http://leadership-for-transition.eu/>

This is why the location in Rastatt had been chosen, since the local representative of ALFA/AECR, MEP Bernd Kölmel, has his constituency there.

As a newly founded political party which so far had difficulties making it into the media, ALFA probably had fairly high expectations towards the overall conference in terms of public attention, image making and media coverage. And even though ALFA strongly promotes concerns such as citizen involvement and direct democracy, the context of the electoral campaign of course opened up and constituted a certain tension throughout the event (which the facilitators and some of the hosting individuals were well aware of).

Place (location and venue)

Rastatt is a medium size town in the south west of Germany (Land Baden-Württemberg). The location (Theatersaal, Reithalle, Rastatt) is a large conference hall owned by the city. The choice of location was partly determined by the main host's connection with it. The local representative of ALFA/AECR, MEP Bernd Kölmel, is a citizen of Rastatt and has his constituency there.

The conference hall had a maximum capacity of 244 people. Its rear part is designed as a gallery (with movie theatre seating) while the lower, main part of the hall provides plenty of space for the circular Collaboratory seating, as well as for smaller working groups. In the lobby, we had a caterer provide tea and coffee breaks and a lunch offering.

Issue at stake/concern/main focus

The topic of the Collaboratory (and the previous conference) was the refugee crisis and how it could be solved. German chancellor Angela Merkel had decided to disregard the existing Dublin agreement in the spring of 2015 and allow a large number of refugees mostly coming from Syria or the near Eastern region, to enter Germany as an act of benevolence. This decision has since then been subject of controversial discussion. At the same time, public discourse and political culture in Germany are very sensitive towards anything that recalls nationalist positions or values of excluding certain groups from the political community due to its nazi past. Therefore, critics of Merkel's generous politics both towards refugees and with regard to European integration in general, had a hard time getting their voice heard without being immediately labelled "nationalists", "extreme right" or worse.

The hosting organization, ALFA, was generally critical of the government's refugee politics, deploring the disregard of existing laws and agreements in Europe, and fearing that existing institutions, as well as society at large might not be able to handle more refugees without neglecting their primary functions. On these grounds, those participants who were close to ALFA probably hoped to receive confirmation of their views at the conference, or to develop clearer ideas of how to argue them and to develop political claims around them.

However, the preparation team pre-defined a guiding question together with the host that was open to a broader range of perspectives, positions, interpretations and answers to the problem. In order to invite a maximum constructive dialog, we framed the **guiding question** as follows:

"What are the chances, conditions and possible limits of successfully integrating refugees in Germany?"

This question was not only the main focus during the Collaboratory and the opening question to be touched by the experts in the fishbowl, but it was also present during the first day of the conference where all speakers discussed it and thus provided a broader range of perspectives onto it. The speakers of day one of the conference covered the following perspectives and dimensions:

Panel 1: international and European politics:

- The refugee crises as a prism for highlighting fundamental problems of the EU, and for redefining its character as a value community, a community governed by the rule of law, and a community of solidarity
- The refugee crises from the perspective of international and security politics: global causes of migration and its security implications on global and domestic levels

Panel 2: legal issues and domestic politics:

- The German, European and international legal and regulatory framework to be taken into account by migration and refugee politics
- The concept of social resilience – a potential way out of the crisis?

Panel 3: Culture and religion: the challenge of Islam:

- What kind of Islam do we want/need/get for Germany and Europe? What kinds of Islam do Muslim refugees adhere to? Which kinds are compatible with liberal democracy? How can we support those?
- The Muslim community in Germany and the refugees: what kind of support is possible?

At the end of the first day, a summarizing panel invited all speakers to give a final statement in response to the guiding question (see above) based on their presentations.

Participants

The first day of the conference attracted around 120 participants; the Collaboratory on the second day had around 55 participants, aged 18-75 (with a dominance of males aged 45-65) most of whom had also participated in the first day. The majority of participants were members, sympathizers or even office holders of the hosting party (ALFA), some of whom had travelled rather long distances to be part of the event – and thus to support their party in receiving public attention. A smaller percentage of participants were ordinary citizens of Rastatt and the surrounding area who had found out about the event via the media and various forms of advertisement. In addition, there was a number of invited stakeholders such as representatives of the city of Rastatt and their activities in the area of integrating refugees, local NGOs and charities, refugees themselves and church initiatives. While the circle of participants was largely beyond our control, we tried hard and somehow successfully to provide a mixed group of experts involved in different kinds of practical work around the refugee topic (see below).

As a general challenge, the Collaboratory had to deal with the fact that the audience was not as diverse as it might have been desirable. In this sense, it was not an “ideal” Collaboratory audience, since it lacked political heterogeneity.

Degree of their familiarity and previous cooperation experience

A considerable part of the participants (especially those belonging to older generations) were apparently strongly identified with “conventional” ways of debating and of doing politics, while collaborative approaches were rather new to them. A small number of participants even voiced their discomfort and incomprehension about parts of the methodology (for example, through comments such as “kindergarten” when we started the visioning).

At the same time, the participants belonging to the ALFA network were rather well connected between each other – and had a strong interest in making the event a success. Therefore, they proved to be fairly cooperative. Most of the ALFA folks spend a lot of their free time for building up the party and for helping it to participate in the upcoming elections and can be considered highly motivated and politically engaged citizens.



Their efforts to achieve participation in the upcoming elections only eight months after the establishment of the party had turned them into a strong, idealistic community as such. This was even more so since most of them had not been politically active previously, but rather joined based on a shared feeling that a “healthy” kind of liberal conservatism is lacking in today’s political landscape in Germany, so they as “enlightened citizens” had to become active. Some of them had previously also belonged to the “liberal camp” in Germa-

ny’s most successful newcomer party, AfD (Alternative for Germany), but left it when the latter was taken over by more nationalist, right wing forces. Others had never joined AfD because they had been too critical of that right-wing camp from the beginning.

Anyway, most of the ALFA sympathizers were open enough to engage in something new, all the more a trans-partisan approach, and to trust the process (as they had been asked to do in the beginning). Often successfully working in business contexts, many of them might have been familiar with some of our methodologies from those contexts. This, however, has not been investigated explicitly.

Degree of involvement/commitment of participants around the issue

Since the issue of integrating refugees was omnipresent in the media at the time (and continues to be), hardly anyone is without an opinion on it. In order to get a better sense of the participants’ actual personal connection to the topic, we used this as one of our questions during the “unconventional getting to know each other” at the beginning of the event, asking participants to line up in the room according to their degree of involvement around the issue. It turned out that only few of the participants had been intensively in touch with the issue or with individual refugees in person before. Most of the group assembled in one corner of the room, while at the other end, we almost exclusively saw those people we had invited as “experts”. It is a well-known phenomenon that people who are less familiar with refugees/foreigners tend to be more fearful and worried about them and their integration than people who are actively engaged. But most participants of this event were rather involved and engaged around ALFA in general, rather than around the issue itself.

General preparation and pre-event activities

The event has been carefully prepared about three months ahead of time. Part of the preparation was:

- to align and agree with the hosting organizations about basic goals and principles, as well as the core focus of the event
- Choosing the right venue

- Defining the right time frame and structure of the event in relation to the target group
- Preparing day one (conference format) and inviting suitable speakers to bring in a broad range of perspectives on the topic
- Contacting suitable experts for the Collaboratory fishbowl, either by phone, email or, if possible in person, managing expectations and questions
- Arranging online and print advertisement for the event (leaflets, ads and banners in the local press etc.)
- Inviting a second facilitator with expertise in citizen dialogs, and synchronizing expectations, experiences and ideas in view of the facilitation process with him
- Other logistical preparations (such as ordering facilitation materials etc.)

Before the event, intensive talks took place between the project manager/co-facilitator and the host, as well as with a considerable number of invited experts. The strongest impression – and the biggest challenge of this preparation phase was the difficulty to find participants, especially experts from as broad a range of stakeholder perspectives as we would have liked to have. Thus, inviting the stakeholders proved to be considerably hard work and kept project management busy until the very last moment. This might have been due to the facts that

- a) most experts and activists engaged around the refugee topic were completely booked for many months ahead given the timeliness of the issue, and
- b) that the context of the event (especially the host and campaigning situation, see above) were not completely neutral in the sense of their own political agenda.

Considering the reluctance of some of the more official local stakeholders to take part in a “political” event, the project manager chose to pay personal visit to some of them, for instance one of the Church run institutions working with refugees, and made several phone calls afterwards to check back whether they could come. Eventually, this resulted in two experts from Rastatt. The other experts were more or less close acquaintances of the project manager and thus, easier to convince and enroll. Ultimately we had the following practitioners in the role of “experts” opening the fishbowl:

- A lady (Italian-German) currently hosting four minor refugee boys from Afghanistan and Iran
- a lady working as a full-time social worker with refugees at Caritas (Catholic charity) Rastatt
- a German of Turkish origin who has been born here and is now working in his successful (Turkish) family business, as well as engaged politically for ALFA
- a lady of Brazilian origin who came to Germany at age 12 and has now made a nice career
- a refugee from Afghanistan who came to Rastatt two years ago and is now engaged in helping other refugees
- a German lady who has lived in Russia for 20 years and has founded “Growin Germany”, a start-up helping migrants to develop their own business and thus, to become economically independent.

A couple of pre-event conversations by phone were conducted with all of them, to introduce them to the format and the role we expected them to play.

Unfortunately, we did not succeed to get representatives of the regional government or the city of Rastatt as experts, nor of the local police force or of security companies in charge of guarding refugee camps. While the former three explained this by referring to the political character of the event,

the latter, in background talks, explicitly stated that they were afraid of negative consequences if they spoke up openly about their (partly negative) experiences around refugee camps in public.

Besides this direct preparation, the project manager visited a couple of events related to the topic before the conference (i.e. public discussion of the Freiburg city council with volunteers helping refugees, private initiative coordinating voluntary helpers, etc.).

Character and designing of the venue, setting the stage

The venue was a rather big conference hall (Reithalle, Theatersaal) owned by the city of Rastatt which we rented for an affordable price. It consisted of an overall space of about 580 m², most of it on the main floor, and a small part in the form of a gallery. The hall disposed of large windows and was thus very bright and light-flooded.

It had professional sound and video technique, including a technician at our disposal throughout. So we could use microphones and a beamer for showing slides informing about the agenda and play an introductory video.

The physical “stage” was set by building the typical concentric Collaboratory seating for about 80 people in the center part of the main floor. We left the chairs from the previous day on the gallery, partly for practical reasons, partly to use them at the beginning of the Collaboratory. In the first part, during the welcoming and introducing basic rules and principles, as well as for showing the introductory video, participants could sit on these chairs in what to most of them might have been a more familiar setting.

In several corners of the room, we had pre-arranged circles of chairs for the breakout group work, including flip charts and movable walls, paper and pens for each group.

As on the previous day, the room was decorated with a couple of posters and rollups of the host.

Duration of the event

The Collaboratory lasted 4 hours, starting at 9.30 am, with a break around 11.30h, and closed at 13.30h. This time span proved to be the very minimum that was necessary to enter a meaningful process, given the lack of experience of most participants with collaborative methods. Yet, the host insisted on this overall time frame. Therefore, the Collaboratory was framed as an “appetizer” to new modes of collaborative decision-making.

B. The Collaboratory process as a whole

This section describes the different phases of the process, focusing on how the design was adapted to the needs of the context, how facilitation framed and modified single elements in the course of the process, and to what degree both was successful.

Facilitation took place as co-facilitation **shared between two facilitators** (Thomas Uhlendahl and Elke Fein). While Thomas Uhlendahl has an important record in hosting and facilitating collaborative citizen dialogs on the local level in the region of South Baden, Elke Fein was the project manager of the greater conference and initiated the Collaboratory format and setup.



Since this was not a LiFT event, we did not have observers with a special attention and focus on certain elements of the event in the room. The account below was therefore mainly compiled based on the perspective of the author of this case-study, who was also co-facilitator and project manager of the event.

Welcoming in the hall:

Before the start of the Collaboratory, participants had the opportunity to take tea and coffee at the buffet and connect informally in the hall. Most of them had been present the day before or even at an evening dinner that eve and thus had things to share and talk about from the previous event. The circular Collaboratory seating already being set up in the large hall, it was noticeable that many participants were pleasantly surprised and curious about the unfamiliar setting, thus starting to wonder what was going to come. Some material about LiFT and the Collaboratory was available on information tables.

0. Opening and ice breakers:

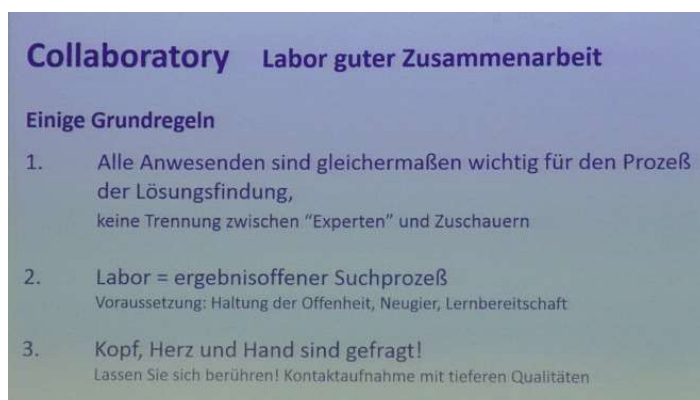
The **biggest challenge** to facilitation – besides the very limited time frame (4 hours) – probably was the unfamiliarity of large parts of the audience with collaborative methods as they are used in the LiFT context. Many participants (around 70%) were active members or passive supporters of the hosting party and thus mainly used to the dominant competitive modes of reasoning which they experience in the current political system on a daily basis.

Therefore, at the beginning, we took a couple of minutes to explain basic rules and principles of the Collaboratory such as

- No separation between experts and listeners, every participant being equally invited to contribute and share their ideas
- A laboratory setting, meaning that we are going through an open-ended process of inquiry, the result of which could not be anticipated or controlled, inviting curiosity, active listening and openness towards other opinions, including letting go of pre-conceived convictions
- Participants were invited to show up as whole persons, including emotions, personal experiences and willingness to engage

In order to strengthen this attitude of personal involvement, we then showed a two minute [teaser video](#). It was about refugees who had gathered at train stations in several German cities, with banners and bunches of flowers which they handed over to female passers-by as a sign of their protest against the assaults against women in Cologne by groups of young male refugees on New Year's eve of 2015/16, thereby showing their solidarity with both German women and with a civic ethic of peacefulness and respect.

After this short intro we invited all participants over to the ground floor for a sequence of unconventional **socio-metric speed-dating**. Using questions such as where people came from and to what extent they had already been personally in touch with the refugee problem, they were asked to line up in the room according to what their answer was. It turned out that most participants did not have



much personal experience with the issue. However, when randomly throwing a catch-box to participants, several of them felt moved to express biographical experiences and personal concerns which did reveal that quite a few of them had migrant histories in their families which they might not have shared with strangers before. This helped to generate an open, personal and constructive atmosphere.

1. Phase: Downloading & Dialog

After this short ice-breaker exercise, we invited participants into the concentric arrangement of circular chairs for the **fishbowl** which was opened by just a few guiding remarks about the format, followed by introductory statements of our experts. The experts invited into the fishbowl included:

- A lady who is currently hosting 4 minor refugee boys from different countries
- A refugee from Afghanistan now working for Caritas Rastatt
- A German with Turkish origins who's grand-parents have been migrants
- The founder of "growin Germany", a startup supporting refugees to set up their own business
- A young woman with Brazilian origins who has come to Germany at age 12
- A social worker from Caritas Rastatt's refugee work

All experts had been previously briefed about the method and the process and what role we invited them to take over. Among them, three had a background in the hosting party, the other three were externals, invited either by one of the facilitators or the host.



Their diverse opening statements introduced a broad panorama of aspects, and their turn-taking increasingly set a tone of individual narratives, mindful listening and personal engagement.

While at the beginning of this sequence, some people from the "audience" in the outer circles still felt moved to reply or comment directly on elements of what one of the "experts" had said, facilitation smoothly recalled the rules of the fishbowl, namely that anyone who wanted to share an idea could do so once the experts had finished their statements.

In fact, throughout the fishbowl, facilitation had been quite active, with the lead facilitator Thomas Uhlendahl sitting in the center circle with the experts, often probing into and reframing what speakers had said in order to connect it to the overall conversation and keep the focus visible. This was a

practice specific to this Collaboratory that we had not previously used in LiFT, but which felt adequate to the given context, because it allowed the facilitator to establish a better connection with the participants and invite them to trust the process they were not used to.



After having given all experts the opportunity to respond to and comment on one another, the setting was opened for the people sitting in the larger external circles. Interestingly, the fishbowl then developed into a space of deep sharing and perspective taking between a large number of participants, some of whom had been rather skeptical of the method at the beginning of the experiment. After some initial irritation of some about the unfamiliar rules of the conversation, participants then joined in easily, and with more and more eagerness.

It turned out that many of them had something interesting to contribute from the realm of their personal background and living context, and most of it was quite constructive. As mentioned before, many participants having some kind of “migrant background” in their earlier family history, sharing biographical narratives helped to build bridges between perspectives and to transcend more superficial identities and senses of belonging, for instance to a particular political “camp” with a corresponding point of view. This seemed to be an eye- (and heart-) opening experience for most participants, given that this type of conversation went much deeper than what they would usually experience – and practice themselves in their regular political contexts.

Therefore, the facilitators chose to extend the fishbowl sequence way beyond the time limit that was originally scheduled for it (1 h). And even when we had to stop it at some point, ending it felt like a harsh act of cutting off more candidates who still wished to express themselves and share their perspectives.

After the fishbowl, there was a 15 min break for coffee and refreshments.

2. phase: Visioning

After the break, we invited participants to get seated in one of the small circles at the edges of the room. Originally, the idea behind this was to give them some time to process what they had heard in the fishbowl (**dialog phase**). But due to time constraints, and since the fishbowl itself already had

quite a strong dialog quality, we decided to directly go over to the visioning.

Schedule of the (half) day

9:30	Welcome & opening
9:45	Unconventional getting to know each other / sociometric constellation (with catchbox)
10:00	Fishbowl
11:00	Coffee break
11:15	Visioning in large group
11:30	Harvesting I (in small groups): harvesting visions
12:00	Harvesting II: share & collect ideas about actionable steps
12:15	Present ideas to large group
12:30	Work on ideas in small groups
13:15	Present results and projects of small groups
13:30	Handing back over to the host, closing and thank yous

We tried our best to make sure no-one entered or left the room during the visioning phase which we called a “future laboratory (Zukunftswerkstatt)”. This format is often used in citizens’ dialogs on local level nowadays. It is a simplified kind of visioning asking participants to do a journey through time up to a place about 30 years from now and look at their own community, observing what has changed as compared to now. In this approach, the element of backcasting from the future is similar to the usual LiFT visioning process, but the previous meditative part, actively taking participants into a more aware, presencing like state of consciousness is left out. While a deeper presencing state is of course very helpful to prepare powerful visions based on collective intelligence to emerge, taking people who are not used to entering these states of consciousness might make them feel uneasy giving up mental control.

So in this case, participants were asked to imagine their country with the current refugee crisis “solved”, the refugees well integrated and their current concerns fully met in a positive way. Even without the presencing exercise, this clearly proved to be the hardest part of this Collaboratory, due to the fact that many participants apparently were not familiar with positive thinking practices either. Many of them apparently had considerable trouble imagining a world where the current problems were solved, in other words, to let go of their inner critic and certain aspects of their existing belief systems which obviously resisted the idea that things could be otherwise than what they knew (or thought) they were currently like. Some had even trouble understanding what was asked of them, thinking we wanted them to adopt the attitude that everything was fine and no problems existed. Those participants confronted us with considerable resistance to the exercise, and a few actually did leave the room. One of the comments in this context was that this was “kindergarden”.

So in hindsight, we probably should have spent much more time (which we actually did not have) on preparing this sequence, including carefully framing and pre-formulating the visioning instructions in a way that was even better adapted to the expected audience. Alternatively, it could be argued that there are limits to the amount of “skeptical” participants that a Collaboratory can constructively deal and work with. Admittedly, participants were more open to – and often even enthusiastic about – this kind of visioning work in most other context LiFT has been working in. At the same time, the realms of more conventional, usually very competitive and mentally biased political decision-making are among those which are in need of more collaborative approaches most of all.

Harvesting the vision(s)

After this comparatively short visioning sequence (5 min), participants, already sitting in small circles, were introduced to the next phase of the Collaboratory, which consisted of **two sub-phases of harvesting** visions and prototypes. First, they were asked to share what they had seen in their vision individually, without commenting on each other's visions (20 min). After that, second, they were asked to name one or more concrete steps, measures or activities that might have led or contributed to the positive changes they had observed in their vision (40 min). Each group had post-its and pens to put up their ideas onto a pin board.



During this phase, again, work around the above instructions went quite well in some groups, while other groups had difficulties focusing on what they were expected to do. For some results of the first, see the section below.

Yet, even though the facilitators constantly observed and assisted the groups with keeping the focus, it was obvious that the second group of participants were apparently too deeply rooted in certain

mental habits to let go of their feelings of suspicion, fear and sometimes anger, as well as in a mode of externalization, critique and blaming (parts of) the system for the current state of affairs. This resulted in expressions of discontent, helplessness with and frustration about the process as such and a certain unwillingness to actually engage in the exercises they were asked to do.



3. phase: prototyping

Nevertheless, during the harvesting sessions, a couple of substantial constructive ideas for prototyping desirable futures came up in the majority of groups, that proved to be important and meaningful to the participants who developed them. These included:

- Promoting a concise politics of immigration with explicit rules about what categories of immigrants are actually desirable to invite into the country (which is currently lacking in Germany)
- Establishing (more) personal contact and exchange between ordinary citizens and refugees/migrants
- Hosting citizen involvement processes in relation to important issues connected to refugees
- Strengthening the rule of law and the observation of existing rules

- Providing more individual support for refugees/migrants in terms of education, language etc.
- Strengthening important cultural values and principles which everyone living in the country has to respect



While the original schedule had envisaged to have the groups present their ideas to the plenary first and then team up in potentially changed constellations around the ideas one felt most drawn to deepen and develop further, time constraints forced us to more or less leave people in their groups for a further round of prototyping their ideas. And whoever else was attracted to a particular topic could simply join the existing group.

Even though not much time remained for this last phase of the Collaboratory (20 min), our impression was that this was more than enough for this “appetizer” nature of the event, given that most participants had already received more input than they could digest. This concerned not just the substantial, topic-related aspect, but also the exposure to completely new modes of conversation.

After this last short time slot for prototyping, participants were invited to share what their groups had come up with to the plenary. Ideas and outcomes were collected on pin walls and shortly presented by their authors.



Closing, consolidation and round up

As usual in Collaboratories, the event was closed by handing over the results of the process in the form of the substantial outcomes mentioned above back to the host, in this case represented by the local MEP, Bernd Kölmel, who promised to carry them on into the broader political discussion within his party and beyond.

As a more symbolic round up, the project manager had prepared a short closing comment, citing Antoine de St. Exupéry's little prince (Only the heart can see well, the essence is hidden from the eyes) and recalling that one of the "spin doctors" of the Collaboratory, Otto Scharmer, had found that the quality of the results depends less on external factors than on internal ones. That it matters less how long one speaks or if one has a university degree, but how deeply we enter into contact, true conversation and dialog with each other.



Yet, in the actual situation, the intuition was not to use this comment, given that a number of participants clearly felt uncomfortable with the method. The project manager therefore limited the closing remarks to a more conventional thank you to all and praise of what had been achieved.

C. Outcomes, results and reflection of the event

The Rastatt Collaboratory was not a LiFT event, but an on-demand workshop delivered to an external client in a context that, while lending itself to a Collaboratory topic-wise, turned out not to be an optimal one due to limiting conditions, such as the combination of the host and the campaigning situation. Nevertheless, it did provide us with interesting learnings, too.

Outcomes, projects designed during the Collaboratory and possibility of post-event activities

Given the workshop's experimental character, the extremely limited time for prototyping and the lack of experience of many participants with this kind of approach, we did not expect working groups to go on beyond the gathering itself. As an "appetizer event", the primary aim of the workshop was to provide first hand experiences of collaborative ways of doing politics to an audience which is used to much more competitive logics and practices, rather than expecting groundbreaking outputs. This aim has been reached to a large degree.

No post-event activities have been conducted other than internal reporting and feedback.

Character of interactions between facilitators and participants, overall atmosphere during the event

In view of the composition of the participants, it has to be noted that many already knew each other in connection with their political engagements, while a minority of others came in as external visitors or experts without previous affiliation or contacts to the hosting organization. At the same time, the participants affiliated with the host had an interest in making the whole event a success after all. As most of the audience were quite new to collaborative methods, they were both curious and partly suspicious of what was going to happen during the event. The general atmosphere was "reluctantly constructive" in the beginning, but then opened up as the process began. This was due to a couple of participants voicing very personal experiences already during the socio-metric speed-dating. One of them was even close to tears after following our invitation to show up as whole persons. So from early on after the opening, it became clear that this was not the usual kind of political debating event. Its transformative quality continued to surface in a process of continuous opening up of participants' minds and hearts during the fishbowl session. While in the beginning of the latter, some were still eager to have their voice heard, participants got used to the rules step by step and eventually even began to enjoy the process. The fact that we had to close this session at some point for time reasons even before everybody who was interested could speak up might have led to some frustration for those concerned. Yet, that again might have been another "constructive irritation" of peoples' usual expectations.

Generally speaking, our impression was that the older participants (65 plus) often had more difficulties getting used to – and engaging in the collaborative process, while most of the younger ones were quite easy with it. The "middle aged" ones followed the rules by discipline and good will. One older participant (a former high ranking military who had been one of the speakers on the previous day) came up to me during the fishbowl session (on his way to the bathroom), asking me to confirm his view about the ongoing process that things went rather badly – which I did not at all. Apparently, he was missing the role of a person with particular authority to guide the discussion into some specific direction. He was quite irritated to realize that this was not the aim of the process.

During the last phase of the Collaboratory, the harvesting of visions and ideas for prototypes, the atmospheric field among the participants seemed to split up even more between those who were ok with following the process and those who entered some kind of resistance. Since this last phase had to be shortened due to our extending the fishbowl session, the results were certainly less than perfect, as compared to other collaboratories. Yet, the most relevant aspects, sub-topics and pain points did pop up and got due attention, which for most participants was probably enough for experiencing the overall event as a success.

Interviews and feedback before, during and after the event

Unfortunately, no interviews have been taken. Yet, we received a lot of informal feedback, mostly positive, which individual participants came up to us with on their own initiative. In fact, the event apparently left a strong impression on many participants, and some even said it was the best event the hosting organization had offered so far.

Technically, it would have been possible to circulate a feedback sheet afterwards among the participants, since the mailing list was available. However, this had not been part of the contract at the time.

General reflection and learnings

This Collaboratory was an on-demand workshop for an external client with a number of pre-defined context conditions (date, available time, and host, together causing specific limitations to stakeholder engagement) which the design had to take into account, work with and adapt to. As shown in the box in section B.2, facilitation started off with a well prepared and thought through design which – no surprise here – had to be modified in the course of the process though.

While the introductory phase went rather well and according to schedule, the fishbowl requested a lot more time than planned – and could easily have been extended a lot further. Once the participants got used to the rules of speaking one at a time and sharing personal experiences, it turned out that a great number of them actually had quite strong and deep personal experiences connected to the topic, which they increasingly stepped in to share. Therefore, in hindsight, the fishbowl turned out to be the most important and most enriching part of the Collaboratory, providing a powerful experience of openness, deep listening, being able to share personal concerns, worries and moments of joy. It also was a space for joint reflection and of collaboratively inquiring into constructive ideas. This certainly went far beyond what most participants were used to in terms of political communication and debate.

Due to our extending the fishbowl phase, there was relatively less time left for the visioning and co-creation phases. In fact, given that many participants were not used to developing positive visions and practical ideas of how to get there, but seemed to be rather “stuck” in habits of thinking such as criticizing the status quo, we would have needed a lot more time and stakeholder preparation to do a successful “regular” Collaboratory with this kind of participant group. So in that sense, we (the facilitators) were quite pleased to be able to close the event after only a relatively short prototyping phase with relatively meager results. Nevertheless, we did consider it a worthwhile attempt to provide “newcomers” with first experiences of the method and expose them to collaborative group work.

Beyond that, one might ask whether there is such a thing as a “right” or “perfect” setting and set of stakeholders to be invited to a Collaboratory. While the LiFT Methods Book, for good reasons, defines a couple of criteria that have to be met in order for a Collaboratory to be a suitable method, i.e. to achieve its core purpose, the Rastatt case shows that it can still have an impact in less optimal settings. Given the underlying tension (between the host being a political party with a specific political agenda – and the generally transpartisan ideals of the Collaboratory) that was characteristic of this event, our initial intuition that less might be more here was confirmed during the process.

In fact, the Open Space rule that whoever comes are the right people seems to have proven right again here, despite the politically quite homogeneous composition of participants. So in hindsight, one more learning was that while thoughtful reflection of what the ideal set of stakeholders *would* look like is important, it is not necessary to panic if certain stakeholders one would have liked to have are not available. Instead, one should trust that ultimately, the right ones will be there. For instance, <http://leadership-for-transition.eu/>

in the given case, I imagine that if there had also been representatives of the “green” or socialist political camps, it would most probably have been very difficult to enter a respectful and constructive kind of conversation, at least in the short time frame that was available. The huge amount of emotional energy that is generally connected to the topic, and which is usually not given adequate space in more conventional conversation formats, needs sufficient space to be processed adequately. So for the time being, the general principle that the more diverse the group of participants and stakeholders in terms of political outlooks and practical experiences, the better the “quality” of the Collaboratory, might have to be modified when working in certain areas of the political field as it currently exists.

Moreover, the above mentioned tension between the conventional perspectives of political parties and the fundamentally transpartisan approach of the Collaboratory refers to a deeper, structural limitation of our current, rather competitive political systems. Transforming political decision-making towards more collaborative processes is therefore certainly one of the most important challenges western societies are facing in the next decades.

LiFT has not yet gained extensive experience with using the Collaboratory in more explicitly political settings². At the same time, we see this kind of bridge building across political camps as a vital challenge and thus, as crucial and promising avenue for further work. Yet, to address this inbuilt systemic tension appropriately, single Collaboratories are hardly sufficient. Rather, it needs a more long-term evolutionary approach, including broader educational components, to achieve the necessary transformations of political cultures and practices in Europe and beyond, which could then eventually also implement lasting systemic transformations.

For this time though, watching people opening up beyond their usual comfort zone and sharing personal experiences, feelings and ideas they might not otherwise have shared before, while accepting what for most of them were unfamiliar rules of the conversation was probably the most valuable result our workshop could achieve – and as much as could be expected from this experiment in the given context.

² For another, more positive example of a Collaboratory in Tartu (Estonia) conducted on demand for a political host see the [IFIS newsletter no° 7](#).
<http://leadership-for-transition.eu/>