

A Bilingual Cooperative Planning Process on the Swiss-French Border in the Basel Area

1. Situation

The city of Basel is located on the north-western edge of Switzerland. With the borders of France to the west and Germany to the north, the urban dynamic of Basel has been constrained over the centuries.

The growth of the city originally took place in the southern and eastern parts of the town. During the 20th century this included the first industrial sites, the transportation infrastructure of the harbour and the railway network. Later, from the 1970s vast residential areas were added. As a result of the geographically constrained housing and infrastructure growth, Basel is shaped asymmetrically with a huge agglomeration as an appendix on the Swiss side of the town. With the recent activities of cross-border partnership a tri-national agglomeration is more and more becoming established, being advantageous to any urban activities.

The area of interest is situated on the Swiss-French border as part of the Basel agglomeration. It belongs to three municipalities Allschwil, Switzerland (18632 inhabitants), Hegenheim, France (2836 inh.) and St. Louis (20321 inh.) and contains about 100 hectares. Even though the main part of the project area is still greenland and pasture, Swiss and French residential or industrial zones are emerging from the fringe. The sense of place has been determined till now by farmland and gravel exploitation.

On the one hand, the city of Basel and its neighbour municipalities Allschwil participate in the industrial life science cluster of world-wide importance - on the other hand, the French villages right across the border still maintain their rural characters. More recent commercial buildings projects in Basel widen the gap between the growing city and the rural, on local commercial activities focused French communities. The greenlands attract the town of Basel due to its scarce land resources - likewise the French municipalities need to maintain their residential qualities and rural identity.

The site is equally well connected to the highway network and the local traffic system, but public transportation almost only exists on Swiss territory. As a result, daily commuting car-traffic blocks the Basel traffic and parking spaces. Due to the close airport Basel-Mulhouse the noise emissions touch already the legal limit, signifying that the development of more residential zones is not reasonable and of no environmental quality.

The questions arising from the present situation are:

- How will the greenlands be used in future?
- How will the greenlands be protected in their ecological, agricultural and leisure functions?
- How could the transportation system be more balanced between the French and Swiss areas?

2. Project Implementation

More than for other regions, planning projects across the border have always been more advantageous and important for the Basel area as an approach of development. Today, tri-national cross-border activities and organizations are well established and supported by Interreg programs, but the cross-border contact of the civil society is still rare.

In order to develop a master plan for the Swiss-French border area, a cooperative planning project was set up in 2005 by the tri-national planning organization (TAB). The costs were covered by Interreg Program III A for regional transborder studies.

The idea of the employer TAB to create a master plan for the border area was twofold:

- First, the future land use of that area should be clarified in order to give all involved municipalities chances for a sustainable development.
- Second, the cooperation between the villages Allschwil, Hegenheim and St. Louis should be improved in order to involve important stakeholders of these municipalities in the cross-border activities of the TAB. In terms of method, the French communities should be introduced to cooperative and participating planning processes.

It was of strong interest of the tri-national planning organization TAB to prepare the ground for a more communally based Euro-District, which succeeded in 2007. The implementation of the master plan on the Swiss-French border area will be one out of many future projects to contribute to a close cross-border cooperation between the Swiss and French neighbours.

In order to implement a cooperative planning process four full-day workshops were established with political, administrative, economic and civil representatives of the three municipalities. Experts for transportation, landscape design, urban planning and communication supported the group of 34 members.

Composition des participants aux ateliers de travail

Zusammensetzung der Teilnehmenden an den Workshops

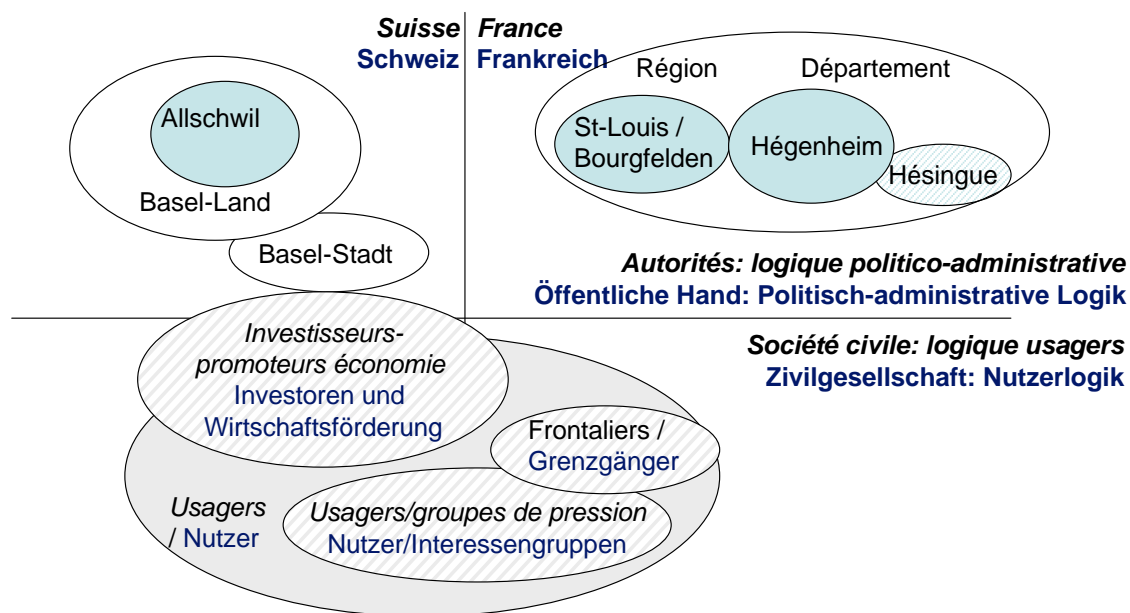


Fig. 1: Groups of people involved in the planning process

Due to the fact that French and Swiss representatives came together, bilingual working conditions had to be implemented. The knowledge of German and French was an essential qualification to participate. The rule was set up that every member has to understand both languages, but was allowed to communicate in his mother-tongue. Although the bilingual communication in the Basel area is more or less common in leisure time, the understanding on a professional level and the mutual understanding of two different political systems and planning cultures was a challenge.

The four workshops focussed on the following issues:

- Workshop 1: Project objectives, key information of municipalities, Swiss / French planning system, SWOT-analysis
- Workshop 2: Future land-use vision, layout of different scenarios
- Workshop 3: Economy and transportation expertises, intensifying scenarios
- Workshop 4: Decision on scenarios, sketched master plan, commitment on strategy and activities

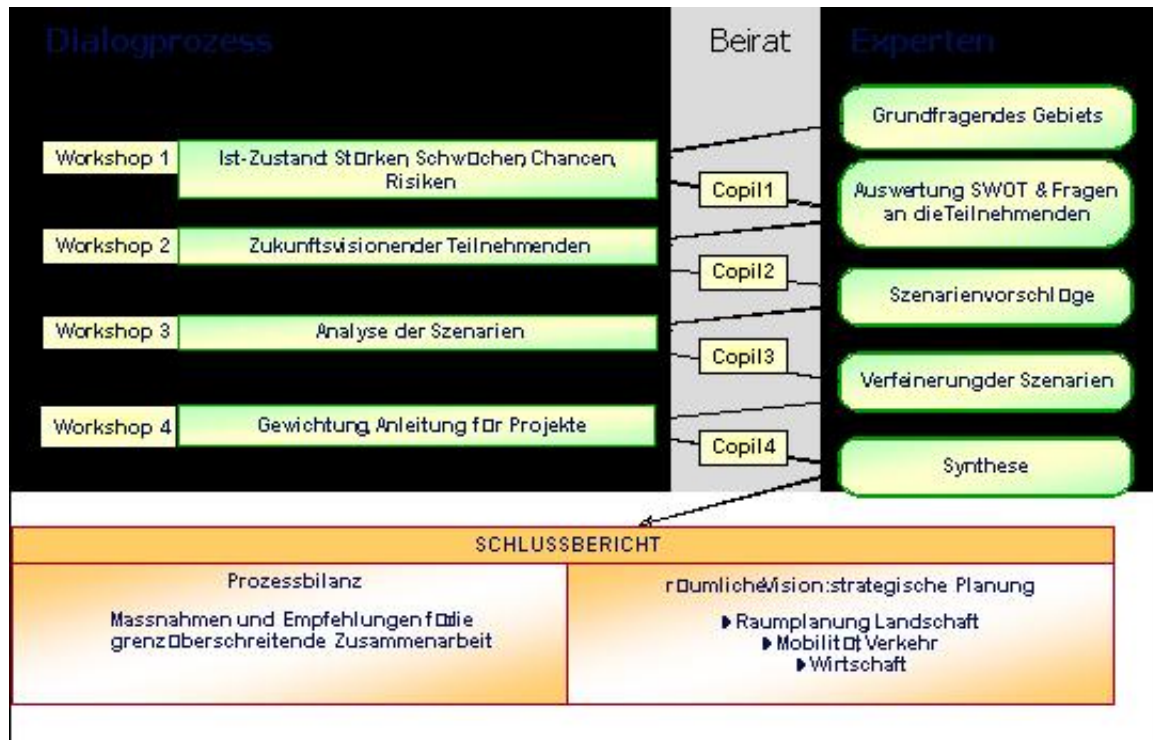


Fig. 2: Succession of workshops in the planning process

3. Results and Planning Strategy

As a result of the participation process, a rough master plan of the cross-border area was developed, based on a broad agreement of the involved representatives. The master plan lined out the strategy for the future urban and landscape development of each village. The common strategy for the greenland site promotes a development which clarifies the fringes of the agglomeration by high lightening the threshold between urban density and rural landscape. The persistence of the own identity of the cross-border area should be supported.

The main results could be summarized:

- Industrial and commercial activities will be concentrated in the neighbourhood of the already existing life science cluster of Allschwil/ CH.
- Residential zones will be fixed on their present dimension, supporting inner development by urban density.
- Retail centers, shopping malls, and leisure parks will not be permitted in the perimeter.
- A legal and fiscal base is needed for the foundation of a cross-border enterprise zone.

- High-level architecture and design is required to clarify the fringes of the agglomeration.
- Greenlands will be designed as recreation and leisure parks for the residential areas of Basel, Allschwil, Hegenheim and St. Louis.
- The cross-border public transportation has to be improved by additional bus lines and park+ride-zones in Allschwil.
- Commuting car-traffic from France to Switzerland will be hampered by car park management.
- Cross-border cooperation will be established by regular meetings of the political lead of the three municipalities.

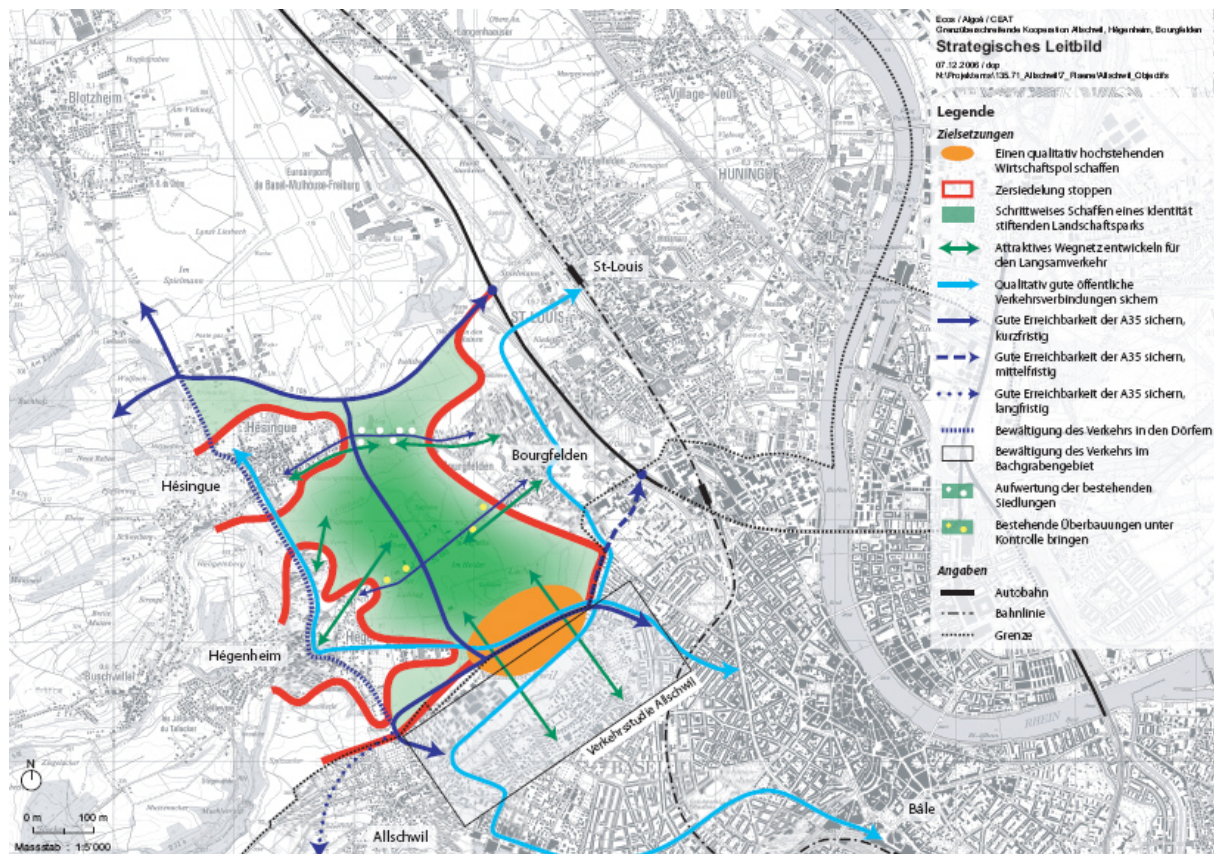


Fig. 3: Strategic plan for future development

4. Evaluation of the Process

The involvement of citizen in collaborative planning and decision-making was an innovation for most of the members, particularly for the French colleagues. Finally the results of the participation process depend strongly on the members involved, but it has been a worthwhile experiment for the municipal authorities to share their planning assignments with the "users".

The master plan for the bilingual greenland area has been - as a common product - the most important result of the participation process. This master plan and the list of activities to realize it was regarded as a clear commitment between the planning partners and set the organization on a strong base, which will facilitate the process in future. Without a basic agreement by the municipalities all future activities will only be of one's own interest.

Positive results of the process were:

- Identification with the results
- Application of new techniques
- New social networks
- Informations based on experts AND amateurs
- More understanding for roles, facts, systems, and language
- Step-by-step-learning

Obstacles of the process were:

- Need of time for explanations and translations
- Common denominator on a low level
- Too different backgrounds of knowledge
- Participants are crucial to success
- Bilingual discussions simplified informations

5. Outlook

It can be concluded from this case study that an integrated approach for border regions is required. Having a lot to consider, planning in cross-border context is more challenging than it would otherwise have been the case. Due to communication - or even - translation efforts, the results often remain on simple levels.

But we suppose the most important result of the one year planning process was the mutual understanding of two different political systems, the different planning culture, the language, and the persons involved, in order to establish a common base for future cross-border activities. Maybe talking in trialogues means to create the necessary atmosphere for any collaborative democratic planning project.

Further information on the Euro-District Basel in German and French:
www.eurodistrictbasel.eu