

Enabling progress through dialogue

Heinrich Böll Foundation project



Overcoming antagonism

For decades, cars have been a focal point of the environmental and climate debate, with frustration mounting on both sides. Ahead of the 2013 German federal election, both the Green Party-affiliated Heinrich Böll Foundation (hbs) and the German Association of the Automotive Industry (VDA) wanted to break the political gridlock.

Bridges for progress

Progress starts with dialogue. But by the early 2010s, debate had largely deteriorated to antagonism – with both sides increasingly entrenched in their respective ideological comfort zones. Before any progress could be reached, dialogue had to be established. For dialogue to work, trust had to be built.



at the expense of the loyalty to the respective constituents: Talks could not be secret.

Step by step, topic by topic

The title “Auto 3.0 – The future of the automotive industry” neither denied the future importance of the car, neither the need for progress, acknowledging the starting points of both sides. The program consisted of two parts: First, six small, non-public expert talks, each on one specific topic, over the course of nine months. This created the foundation for the second part: A large, public, two-day conference on the same topics, to disseminate the dialogue to constituents and media alike.



Building trust

We built our strategy on two pillars: On the one hand, trust is more easily established in a private and safe environment: Talks had to be non-public. On the other hand, trust could not be given

Dialogue is individual

At the expert talks, both sides provided equal representation, with half of participants recurring, the other half invited per topic. These talks took place in different cities across the country to broaden the reach, even before the public conference. All participants shared contact details for further dialogue, which was fostered by the ongoing circulation of documentation.

Foundations for progress laid

Auto 3.0 fostered ongoing dialogue on multiple levels, both of the representative and public kind as well as in the background. The biggest test came in 2015 in form of the diesel fraud scandal. It had all the ingredients to reset the landscape to pre-dialogue times. Despite tensions, a similar dialogue format was installed in green-led Baden-Württemberg.

In 2017, after the next German federal elections, automotive CEOs publicly voiced their frustration about the breakdown of the talks to form a so-called Jamaica coalition, explicitly since it would have included the Green Party. This, while still newsworthy, would have been highly unlikely just five years earlier.



Disclaimer

This was a project of the German Association of the Automotive Industry (VDA) and the Heinrich Böll Foundation (hbs) under the leadership of our managing partner, Dirk O. Evenson, then Head of Communications at VDA, and Micha Walther, then Executive Assistant to the Board of hbs. All photos by Stephan Röhl, license CC BY-SA 2.

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