

# Wisdom Councils

## in the public sector

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This chapter describes the practical experiences of Vorarlberg State Government's Office for Future-Related Issues (Büro für Zukunftsfragen) in facilitating civic participation on socio-political issues, using Dynamic Facilitation and Wisdom Councils. It describes the potential as well as the limitations of this new approach to civic participation. The most important lesson we have learned so far is that for participation to succeed, we need more than powerful methods. What we most need, is willingness on the part of decision-makers to engage in open-ended processes.

### What is a Wisdom Council?

Wisdom Councils are a practical application of Dynamic Facilitation (DF), a group facilitation process developed by Jim Rough. DF is a fascinating approach to group facilitation that can be used in many different settings (business, management, institutions, NGOs, associations, private groups, etc.) to help a group of people arrive at innovative and holistic solutions to complex problems, within a relatively short time and in an enjoyable manner. As a result of the special way in which facilitation is handled in DF, long-winded and tedious discussions are avoided, participants are able to bring forth their criticisms and objections and still feel valued. Thus, both individual and collective learning can take place.

Normally in a facilitated process, a specific topic has been chosen beforehand. Yet in DF, the initial topic is only the starting point for the conversation. It is quite possible (and in fact happens regularly) that in the course of the conversation, a group will discover that the real problem is on another level. The facilitator of the DF process responds by following the energy of the group. Inspired by their shared realization, a new energy is generated to get to the bottom of things and to develop appropriate solutions. In the course of a DF session, a shared view is created out of many individual opinions and viewpoints; in the truest sense of the word, the topic is illuminated from many different perspectives. This is the crucial precondition that allows innovative solutions to develop, and for everyone involved to

become clear on the root of the problem.

It's easy to imagine that in many places where DF could potentially be applied, there may be little interest in finding root solutions; instead, the main interest could be limited to arriving at superficial answers. However, Jim Rough did not want to lose the potential benefit that DF can bring, of empowering a group to go far beyond the initial symptoms to explore the actual background and underlying causes of a situation, thus arriving at more fundamental answers to difficult questions and challenges. And so he created a format where not only is it possible for participants to devote themselves to the "really big" questions, but where they are actually invited to do so. He calls this format the *Wisdom Council*.

In a Wisdom Council, a group of about twelve to sixteen civics will meet for a day and a half to explore a socially relevant issue. In addition to the use of DF as a facilitation process, the remarkable thing is that participants are selected at random based on the population register. It is not possible to volunteer for the Council; each potential participant is drawn by lot (and can then decide if he or she wants to accept the invitation or not.)

The task of the Wisdom Council is to submit a shared statement within the given time frame. "Shared" means that all of the participants (and not just 'the majority') must stand unanimously behind the written statement. The results of the Council are then presented and discussed at a public event. After that, the Council is dissolved. For any new issues, a random selection is performed again and a new Wisdom Council is convened.

As fascinating as the idea of the Wisdom Council is, it initially had very little diffusion. This may be due to the fact that its inventor, Jim Rough, hoped that civics themselves would recognize the value of the method and thus find the ways and means to convene their own Wisdom Councils, instead of having them propagated by the State. However, it is unlikely for this to happen. The breakthrough came in 2004, when the Vorarlberg regional government became aware of this method and began using it as a tool for developing political programs and strategies with the involvement of community members.

## **Civic participation in Vorarlberg**

In 1999, the Vorarlberg State Government created the Office for Future-Related Issues (Büro für Zukunftsfragen) to find answers for increasingly complex socio-political challenges,

while searching for new approaches for reducing the growing gap between government and society. To these ends, the Office for Future-Related Issues began experimenting with various methods in the area of sustainable development at both local and regional levels.

Relatively soon, it became clear that the 'usual' approaches (such as public appeals and educational campaigns to raise awareness) had only limited effects. They were insufficient to create enough social acceptance for the kinds of measures and behavioral changes that would be required to ensure a sustainable quality of life in the region. Only the shift towards self-organizing processes, where community members themselves take on more responsibility - not only for the implementation of solutions, but also for the formulation of key challenges – was able to bring about the desired results. (Examples of this are the local and regional development processes in Langenegg, Götzis and Großen Walsertal.)

Encouraged by these initial successes, the Office for Future-Related Issues continued to emphasize civic participation, paying particular attention to ensuring the open-ended nature of these processes (i.e., that the results of the process are not predetermined.) In 2004, as part of the new program "Children at the Center", a Planning Cells / Civic Report process including "Future Workshops" were used to develop a strategy for more child-friendly policies in our State.

Here, too, the results we obtained confirmed the appropriateness of our chosen path. However, we were not happy with the cost/benefit ratio, since Vorarlberg has a large number of small and medium-sized communities that cannot afford costly public participation processes.

In our ongoing search for powerful yet cost-effective processes, we eventually came across Jim Rough's *Wisdom Councils*. After initial experiments with DF were held in 2006 under the title *BürgerInnen-Rat* (Civic Councils), the first Wisdom Council was held in Wolfurt. Since then, more than 35 Civic Councils have been held within the State of Vorarlberg, and this example has inspired many other Civic Councils outside of Vorarlberg. In 2013, the Vorarlberg State Parliament added a new passage to the state constitution, making a clear commitment to participatory democracy. In doing so, Vorarlberg became the first state in all of Europe to take such a step.

## Wisdom Councils in Practice – Community Members as Policy-Makers

The above-mentioned constitutional amendment has been a significant milestone along the path to developing a more participatory democracy. Along with a directive from the state government which governs the convening and management of Civic Councils, this reflects how these Councils have become an integral part of policy making in Vorarlberg.

To understand this evolution, we need to look at some larger questions. How can we create sustainable policies? What do we need in order to do so, and what actually constitutes good policies? Is a sustainable policy one that strives to provide a high quality of life, or is the purpose of policy decisions to achieve a high degree of acceptance among the population at large?

Since the establishment of the Office for Future-Related Issues 15 years ago, one thing has become clear: the decisive factor is quality of life, as subjectively perceived by community members. This sounds good, but when we take a second look, what does it mean? Each and every person usually has a different understanding about what quality of life means to them: for some, this is based on hard factors such as job opportunities, mobility, and quality of housing; for others, soft factors are critical: social cohesion, peaceful co-existence, mutual support, simply feeling at home. How can we succeed, then, in bringing diverse needs under one roof, translating them into policy measures, and thus creating good policies?

In addition to the different needs among the population at large, there are other factors that make life difficult for policy-makers: the dependence of social policies on the economy, changing demographic trends, the curtailment of decision-making powers, the increasingly widespread disenchantment with politics, and the media environment, to name just a few. How, then, can the political sphere make good policy decisions? Usually, this is done on the basis of political parties' programs, government declarations, negotiations within working groups and committees, and recommendations from many experts.

However, as we've seen in recent years, even while many political decisions are carefully prepared and adopted, they still do not find the necessary acceptance among the population. Confidence in decisions wanes, lack of transparency is high and accountability is difficult at times even for insiders. Community members often arrive at similar conclusions and diagnoses with regard to the challenges of political life today.

Within this larger context, Civic Councils have offered a fresh approach for bridging the divide between government and community. A Civic Council comes together for one and a half days on the basis of random selection. Whether it's a small rural community or a larger urban environment, a group of people who have never met before in this particular constellation, come together to explore an important issue or concern. The question of how to bring together people from all walks of life, to formulate a perspective on what is important to them as a whole, has led to the establishment of the Civic Councils as an instrument of policy consultation in Vorarlberg, whether at the local, regional or state level.

Where else do we find a neutral ground where "normal people" can exchange perspectives on sociopolitical issues and develop possible solutions? At the beginning of each Council, participants are asked how they felt when they initially received a personal invitation to attend from the Mayor or the Governor. Most initial responses range from skeptical to suspicious, while also curious and interested. Yet by the end, we have repeatedly found that most participants are highly appreciative of having been invited to take part.

### **What can a Wisdom Council do? What can't it do?**

It sounds easy, but sometimes simple things are not so simple. Mayors, community leaders, members of the parliament or critical community members rarely see in advance the potential value of these conversations, which often resemble a planning assesment: What is important to the population at large? What themes are emerging? Where do we want to focus? How do we interpret this information?

Sometimes the Civic Council can serve as a kind of pre-evaluation for a planned project. This was the situation in the case of a large urban development project that was being planned in Bregenz. A large area in Bregenz was finally going to be developed, with the participation of several different project partners. This came after decades in which, due to political differences, no agreement had been possible. Before the project went public, the city wanted to protect itself by hosting a Civic Council to accommodate the concerns of the residents in the planning process.

The planner in charge presented the final draft of the master plan to the Civic Council, just before the town council was scheduled to vote to approve the plans. A brief exchange

began, and very quickly this came out : "You have worked hard on this; we community members do not have the planning expertise to assess this plan in detail, yet the most important thing has been forgotten," said the participants. If you have ever been to Bregenz, you know the situation the city has to contend with; the scenic shores of Lake Constance, which are so attractive to tourists, are separated from the city center by a railway line and a busy road. It turned out that the area to be developed was located right at a strategically important point for addressing this major challenge.

This was clearly the perspective that the Civic Council was bringing forth, and in the end they arrived at this clear formulation: "With this project, Bregenz has a historic opportunity to resolve the separation between the lake and city." Based on this insight, the Civic Council developed a great many ideas about how this could be achieved, from a Spanish Staircase to a gondola ferry that could be used to relieve traffic congestion. What was ultimately most crucial were not the solutions themselves, but the opportunity that community members had to exert a positive influence on the development of their city, and to experience themselves as effective participants. Shortly after the Civic Council shared their findings, the Town Council made a unanimous decision. They agreed upon a new master plan which now included a broad overpass and thus addressed the core concern that the Civic Council had raised.

The next set of innovative results demonstrate an application of the Civic Council at the State level. In response to the question "How can we create good neighborhoods?" a Civic Council formulated a clear plea for a better society. As part of this, the Council developed a model of "neighborhood democracy." Their model included having participation and design options within one's neighborhood, and also being aware of these options. Concrete ideas were developed to ensure the successful application of this model. Eventually, this culminated in the concept of "settlement work in Vorarlberg."

In response, the State Government of Vorarlberg commissioned the Institute for Social Services to implement this model. Some sample elements of the model include:

- A Conciliation Board: A key suggestion made by the Council was the introduction of a conciliation board, whose members are equipped with skills and can intervene in case of conflict. This Board is now a part of the larger frame of settlement work in

Vorarlberg.

- Neighborhood democracy was the buzzword that came out of that Civic Council, and it implies greater engagement at the neighborhood level. It includes participatory elements, such as greater direct democracy within the neighborhood, as well as input into different design options for neighborhood development. In particular, having a say with regard to economic incentives was part of the concept.
- - What do we consider to be a good neighborhood? This question was taken up in depth by the Civic Council. Their responses ranged from the attitudes encountered in interactions with one another, to socio-political conditions (labor market policies, financial policies, educational policies, as well as distributive justice), to a shared awareness among many stakeholders about the common concerns and issues in the neighborhood. This differentiated analysis generated by the Council is now included in the concept of "good neighborhood".
- This last point included the opportunities to encounter one another in the course of daily life that must be present, in order to have the experience of "living in a good neighborhood."

Meanwhile, a position has been created to support this settlement work and to take up many of the suggestions of the Civic Council. An adaptation of the Council for a neighborhood context, in the sense of a neighborhood or village council, is already being planned.

A Civic Council can also be seen as an instrument of regional development. For example, a Council that was held in a region consisting of 13 municipalities faced an unusual task. In a new twist from "classic" Civic Councils, an additional incentive was offered: participants were asked to imagine themselves in the role of the mayors of the 13 regional communities, and were given the task of developing concrete proposals for cooperative projects. To this end, a fixed implementation budget of € 3.500 was provided. As a theme, the (apparently) banal and simple question was posed: "The region Vorderland - Feldkirch: What shall we do now?" In addition to a vision of stronger cohesiveness in the region, and to numerous substantive suggestions (for instance, on topics such as community-wide land management, regional recreational facilities, regional food, and regional information and public relations

efforts), participants came up with two concrete projects to implement: First, an annual gathering of the towns (a "Regio-Café") where the general public and the politicians can jointly determine a regional Theme of the Year. Secondly, the establishment of an Outdoor Workout fitness trail in the region to promote physical activity and sport. This example from practice shows the potentials that lie dormant within the population, and that "only" need a container in which they can emerge.

In addition to the kinds of outcomes described above with regard to content and themes, the Civic Councils have a strong impact with regard to community education, as well as a personal impact on participants.

### **What are the characteristics of a Civic Council?**

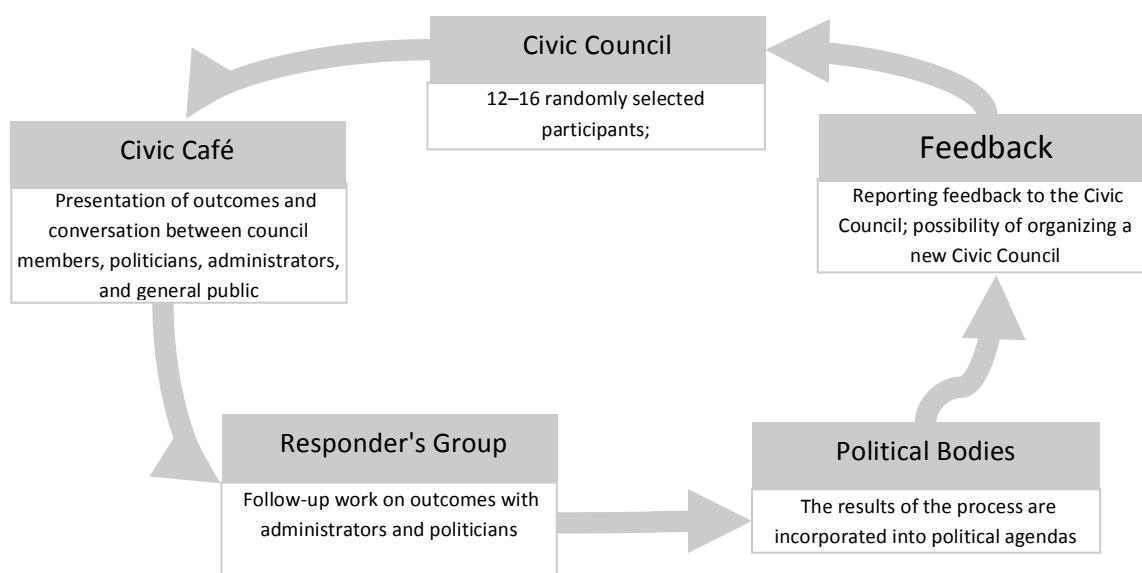
The Civic Council is at minimum a three-step process, consisting of the Council itself, a Civic Café (which involves a public presentation and public conversations) and the Responder's Group, whose purpose is to feed back the findings of the Civic Council to the political system. Additional elements, such as an informational evening during the preparatory stage, or working group meetings as part of the follow-up to the Civic Council, are also useful and can be considered as part of the planning process. The conclusion of the process is a response to the Council participants from the political representatives and governmental administrators in the region, on how the Council's findings have been addressed thus far and what elements will be pursued further.

The participants of Civic Councils are encouraged to explore issues and concerns of their choice during their one and a half days together. As the random selection process results in a diverse composition, the group is almost certain to choose issues that affect many people in the community. As the Council explores these themes, they generate theories, perspectives, ideas for solutions, and recommendations. The DF method contributes significantly to advancing the conversation, while at the same time making it possible to deliberately explore the underlying challenges.

At least as important as having an effective Civic Council, is the integration of their outcomes with the larger political process. Those participating in the Council should not feel in the end that they have been working for a day and a half "for nothing"- instead, their role



and influence within a larger ongoing process needs to be apparent. This creates a context where they can feel valued and recognized for their commitment. As a result of this positive experience, they are more willing to continue becoming involved and to share their experience with others.



Source: authors' own illustration

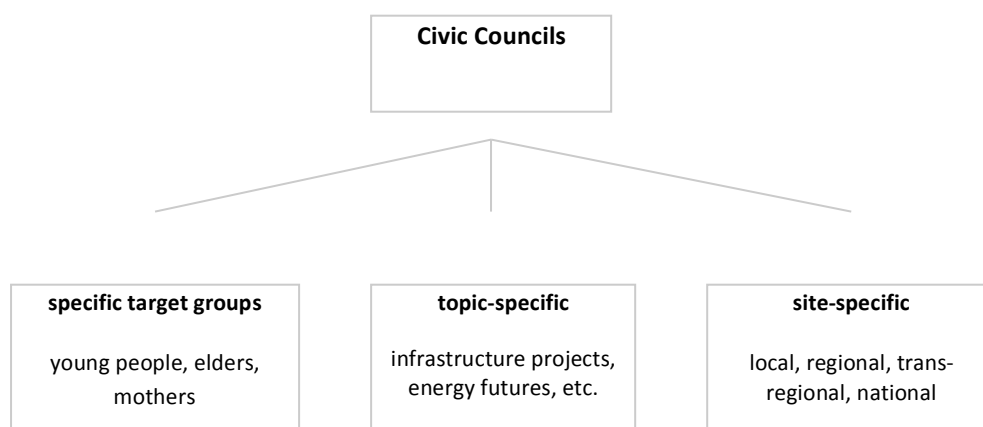
The Civic Council does not make political decisions, yet it still has a great impact within the community. Having their considerations and recommendations presented to the public, creates greater awareness within the community of the shared challenges and the responses that are needed. The Civic Council is a means to deal intensively with complex social problems. It creates a forum of communicative exchange and is also a step toward greater political education. Participating community members are significantly expanding their field of vision and recognizing the complexity of social issues. They understand the necessity to set priorities and recognize the importance of working through particular issues. They are also developing social competencies through exposure to other viewpoints and opinions.

The aim is to encourage people, through their participation in the Civic Council, to become responsible for engaging with the challenges in their environment and begin

searching for possible solutions. Often referred to as "empowerment", this is an essential element of social self-organization. Thus, the Civic Council is a living example of participatory democracy and points to a new path for cooperation between politicians, public administrators, and community members. It has significant impact on community members' identification with their own communities, as well as developing a greater understanding of the challenges faced by politicians and public administrators.

## Fields of application

Civic Councils can be carried out for a specific target group, for a particular subject, or for a particular geographical area.



Since 2006, in Vorarlberg and beyond (other states in Austria, the state of Baden-Württemberg in Germany, various parts of Switzerland and Liechtenstein) there have already been 60 Civic Councils that have been carried out in various towns, cities and regions, as well as at the state and federal level. Within the German-speaking world, Civic Councils have been implemented with greatest intensity in Vorarlberg. Topics that have been explored with Civic Councils include development issues within municipalities and cities, such as economic development projects (for example, projects to revitalize a downtown area or to safeguard local communities), projects for promoting a region or municipality, and urban development projects (for example, transportation or specific construction projects.) Other kinds of topics that have repeatedly come up include

community coexistence within integrated areas, social capital and quality of life, and networks of commitment. A detailed overview of the Civic Councils that have taken place in Vorarlberg thus far can be found at : [www.vorarlberg.at/beteiligung](http://www.vorarlberg.at/beteiligung).

## Conclusion and Summary

A Civic Council is an exciting opportunity to engage in high-quality thinking about significant social developments; through the component of the Civic Cafes, it extends that involvement to a broader public. Through the Civic Council and Civic Cafes, individuals are offered the opportunity to personally engage and participate in a constructive and straightforward manner in political life, without having to involve themselves in political partisanship.

When visiting the Civic Cafes, the constructive atmosphere is highly evident. Instead of disputes, conversations take place in a mostly calm and rational manner. Mutual appreciation predominates, the conversations are held at eye level, and there is room for different viewpoints.

To date, Civic Councils have taken place at different levels: local, regional, national, at the federal level, and internationally. The process has matured over the years, yet its development is still far from complete. Various potentials for further development in different directions are still largely untapped.

At the Office for Future-Related Issues, two issues are currently at the top of our list: How can an even wider public be involved in the process? And, how can we better counsel and support politicians regarding the application of public participation methods?

The latter question in particular points to an interesting development: While in the early years of public participation processes, our questions were primarily about finding the optimal methods to use and about optimizing our processes, it is becoming increasingly clear that today the bottleneck is less with the processes themselves, and instead with having the right attitude on the part of the sponsors. The best method is not worth much when it is applied with the wrong attitude, for example, if it degenerates into a means for gaining popularity.

Civic Councils seem to be a promising method that can help bridge the gap between government and the governed. The method works, but the essential requirement is for it to be applied with the right attitude. And this requires leaders who dare to formulate good

questions, and to invite community members to think together and explore possible solutions.

To really take advantage of the opportunities and potential of participation, we need to develop a new vision and understanding of the role of political life. Our future depends less on heroes and doers, and more on good facilitators and hosts. In order to make good use of the rich treasures of diversity, as well as the wisdom of crowds, we especially need suitable spaces where great conversations are possible. Just complaining about politics and parties does not help us to move forward.

How may we best support our political leaders during this change process?