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# Wisdom Councils in Austria

Joint Research Project of the Ministry of Life and the  
Office for Future-related Questions

Final Report on the Accompanying Evaluation

April 2012

Conducted by

**kairos**



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# Part I

# Results

Context and Goal

Process and Methodology

Results

# 1 Context and Goal

Over the last few months and years, the indications for a sinking trust in hierarchical institutions in general and political functionaries and decision-makers specifically have increased. On the other hand, the instruments for self-organization, public participation and social involvement have not been sufficiently introduced and tested. The ensuing decision-making and power vacuum needs be filled in such a way so as to create an overall higher social resilience.

The current societal challenges and their public awareness peaks have one thing in common: a great uncertainty with regards to the solution strategies and a divide between the decision-makers and the legitimizing people. Be it the currency and debt crisis, the exit from nuclear power use, the construction of train stations or the political changes in the Mediterranean Sea region.

The result have been terms such as Wutbürger (angry citizens) and movements such as 'Occupy' or 'We are the 99%'. At the same time, an increase in failures of political institutions marked by ever new scandals, resignations and a growing gap between "office" and "title" and, therefore, also between politics and citizens.

## 1.1 Client

The Office for Future-related Questions, as part of the local government office in Vorarlberg and the department of EU affairs, environment within the Federal Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, Environment and Water (Life Ministry) joined forces some years ago to bridge this divide with concrete approaches. Instruments and methods for public participation are identified and tested in practical circumstances and evaluated in their effectiveness. The Wisdom Council has shown itself to be a promising method.

The two above mentioned institutions already cooperated in 2008 for the research project "BürgerInnen-Räte" (Wisdom Councils). During this research project, the idea was born to implement an accompanying evaluation to systematically secure and process the results of Wisdom Councils over a specific period of time.

The Kairos gGmbH was, together with the European Institute for Public Participation (EIPP), tasked with implementing this evaluation. This report presents the conclusions. The clients are the Office for Future-related Questions as well as the Ministry of Life with the latter being the formal client for the study. The assignment is in the form of a contract (BMLFUW-UW-1.5.6/0049-V/8-09), dated to December 18, 2009 and concluded at the end of 2011.

## 1.2 The Wisdom Council

The Wisdom Council method has been developed by Jim Rough in the USA. Here, twelve to fifteen randomly selected persons from a community, town, region or other entity, work intensely together for one to two days. They work on self-selected issues and are supported by a facilitator applying the method "Dynamic Facilitation". At the closure of such a Wisdom Council the group concludes a statement which is then present to the community. A comprehensive outline of the systemic effects of a "Wisdom Council" can be found in the appendix.

In the method's application, Jim Rough makes a distinction between Wisdom Councils and Creative Insight Councils. In the former, the organizers make no requests with regards to content. The participants are free to choose an issue which they want to speak about and work on. Creative Insight Council have a pre-determined issue selected by the organizers at the beginning of the process. To which degree the participants adopt this issue during their process is left up to them. Dynamic Facilitation provides the necessary space for development.

The first practical application of the method by the Office for Future Questions goes back to the year 2005. Since then, numerous implementations, with the support of the Office for Future-related Questions, have been conducted and the method has been refined to the current Wisdom Council process. The Austrian name for Wisdom Council is "BürgerInnen Rat" - the citizens council. This includes, besides the one to two day Wisdom Council, a public presentation and reflexion of the results and the atmosphere of the council. In an ideal situation, this process is concluded with a workshop for municipal and political representatives, the so called "resonance group", which covers the results of the Wisdom Council and Citizens Cafe. In Austria, both the Wisdom Council and Creative Insight Councils run under the name "BürgerInnen Rat".

The aim is not to replace the existing political system. Instead, the intention is to provide methodological innovation. In this way, a "new communication level develops", which transforms "political disinterest" into the "will to participate" as mentioned in the Wisdom Council handbook by the Office for Future-related Questions!

## 1.3 Aim of the accompanying evaluation

The Wisdom Council method intends to provide rapid, cost-effective solutions that are relevant to the concerned citizens in face of difficult challenges. These solutions shall be more comprehensive, holistic, long-term and more sustainable, and create more broad acceptance than previous public participation methods.

The hope is that self-organization and participation are indirectly supported and generally increased and, therefore, society becomes more democratic.

The aim of the evaluation is to determine whether this claim can be substantiated. In doing so, the potential and limits of the method will be seen. The process is designed in such a way so that the accompanying evaluation is only a part of the "Wisdom Council" research project. Both clients are working, in parallel, on further activities for the testing, reflexion and spreading of the method in Austria. Training courses and reflexion meetings for practitioners have

been organized and implemented. Input is being given at different levels for the interested public. Classic public relations work is informing about the method. In addition, both institutions are using their capacities to support further use of the method in Austria and to provide resources in the form of facilitation, consulting and reflexion.

This evaluation is only a small building block, which both clients worked intensely on.

## 2 Process and Methodology

The evaluation is designed as an accompanying evaluation. It is highly iterative as it has been developed and planned in close cooperation with the client. Two workshops resulted in the research questions and indicators as well as formulating the evaluation design.

Preliminary results were presented and discussed during workshops in Vienna and Bregenz.

### 2.1 Planning

The first planning workshop was organized on Monday, February 15, 2010 in Bregenz. Participants included representatives from both the clients as well as the implementors. The workshop focussed on the coordination of the process, the search for important and at the same time applicable indicators and the views on potential applications as well as the rough timeframe.

From March 22 - 25, 2010, a Wisdom Council and Dynamic Facilitation training was conducted at the Batschuns education facility. Jim and Jean Rough held the training with representatives from nearly all the Austrian federal states being present.

The second planning workshop took place on April 9, 2010 in Bregenz. Here, the indicators for the accompanying evaluation were finalized.

#### 2.1.1 Indicators

The jointly developed indicators are split into two groups. On the one hand, the quality of the initiated processes is considered. The following indicators are relevant:

- Representation
- Inner transparency
- Inclusiveness
- Quality of deliberation / quality of communication processes
- Connectedness
- Self-effectiveness
- Learning process

The second group of indicators are designed to provide feedback on the resulting effects of the Wisdom Councils. The indicators are:

- Quality of the results
- Effect on decision-making processes

- Public awareness
- Civic education/ democracy skills

### 2.1.2 Preparation

The participants of the training seminar in Batschuns as well as the federal office representatives for the areas participation, sustainability coordination and others were informed by the client about the Wisdom Council research project.

At the same time, a request to name any possible Wisdom Councils was included so as to gather enough events from different federal states.

The goal was to evaluate one Wisdom Council per federal state so as to get the broadest possible picture of the potential effects. This would provide indications about the potential and limitations of the method independently of a specific political culture within a federal state.

## 2.2 Implementation

It soon became evident that during the research period of up to two years there would be too few Wisdom Councils to reach this goal.

Some federal states (especially Vorarlberg) could provide more than the required number of Wisdom Councils. In the other federal states the Wisdom Councils had either not been organized yet, had to be cancelled or were implemented without the involvement of the research project.

For this reason, the research project had to work with far fewer cases and was therefore reduced in effort and cost.

The research followed this sequence:

- Participating observation during a Wisdom Council
- Interview with all the participants immediately after the Wisdom Council and after any follow-on events such as Citizens Cafes, etc.
- Interview with organizers and policy-makers (when possible)
- Interview with specific participants at least 6 months after the Wisdom Council to determine long-term effects and impressions.
- Evaluation of outcome documentation when available

The following Wisdom Councils were assessed for this study:

- Wisdom Council Vienna Liechtensteinstraße (participating observation only due to the early date before the finalization of research indicators); June 25-26, 2010
- Youth Council Sulzberg (Sulzberger Jugendrat, Vorarlberg); November 13, 2010

- Wisdom Council St. Ulrich am Pillersee, Tirol; January 7-8, 2011
- Countrywide Wisdom Council in Vorarlberg: What are our most pressing issues; March 18-19 2011
- Wisdom Council Mödling: Our Mödling in 10 Years (Unser Mödling in 10 Jahren); 8.-9. April 2011

In addition, the results from the following Wisdom Councils and planning phases became part of the report:

- Wisdom Council Bischofshofen, scheduled for September 9 -10, 2011; cancelled due to legal uncertainties about the random selection of the participants
- Regional Wisdom Council Montafon, May 27 - 28, 2011; the participants could not be interviewed since the author was also the organizer and initiator.

## 3 Results

This chapter describes the observations based on the previously presented indicators. Chapter 4 presents the conclusions and the overall recommendations for the “potential and limitations”.

### 3.1 The Quality of Initiated Processes

#### 3.1.1 REPRESENTATION

A central principle of the Wisdom Council method is the random selection of the participants. The important question is how well can 12 randomly selected persons represent the public as a whole.

##### Heterogeneity instead of representation

Although random selection does offer a number of options for inviting different population groups equally (selection is based on age and gender, in some cases additional aspects are included). But it is not possible to view the participating group as representative of the entire population.

The placement of Wisdom Councils need not guarantee representation as the results do not constitute a decision and are non-binding. Instead, they have an advisory character. On the other hand, it is essential to guarantee the heterogeneity of the participants so as to avoid and balance out any bias.

Observations have shown that the participant groups consist of people who are either curious and open or need to “get something of their chest”. This does include critical voices as well. The method itself, which requires intensive listening over long periods of time, prevents domination by individuals with a conspicuously personal agenda.

At the same time, the research has shown that a sound process for the selection of participants is still lacking. For the method developer, this is not a deciding factor as “who ever is there, is the right person”. The method’s application in the context of political processes and decision-makers does necessitate the highest

possible level of heterogeneity as legitimacy is always an issue during the meetings. Unfortunately, optimizing the selection process for heterogeneity has so far only offered few improvements. Alongside administrative and legal barriers (data privacy and a missing legal framework for the random selection using the central register), which have already been processed by the client, it is, especially, the awareness and selection filters created by the invitation which weakens the random selection process. It was possible to observe that for nearly all the Wisdom Councils the response rate was very low. Intensive follow-up, personally or by phone, was necessary to gather the minimum number of participants.

In conversations with the organizers of the Wisdom Councils, who were usually also responsible for the follow-up calls, three main reasons for the low response became apparent:

- Lacking time (especially in the case of caring or working people) due to the large amount of time the method requires.
- Lacking awareness of the invitation. Written invitations are, in the mass of incoming information, easily overlooked. In particular, the stated concern was not understood by the invited participants.
- Mistrust and lacking interest. On the one hand there is a disenchantment with politics and on the other hand a fear of being exploited by some political decision-maker.

The organizers took a pragmatic approach. Within the follow-up group, they contacted such people as were known to them personally and, therefore, already held a certain level of obligation. They also spoke with personal contacts outside of the random selection, but who, nevertheless, could provide the missing characteristics (gender, age group, background) for the participants group.

A consistent aspect of all Wisdom Councils during the observation time was the underrepresented population groups:

- Youths
- People with a migration background
- People with a low education level

Significantly overrepresented were pensioners for whom the above mentioned exclusion criteria did not apply. This created the impression among the younger participants that the invitation had been specifically directed at pensioners.

The method, its placement and the overall concern is still difficult to communicate to the general public. Probably because this approach is diametrically opposite to the conventional political practice. The trust in this kind of direct citizen consulting is not yet established. Where citizens have experienced it - Wisdom Council participants - this trust has grown. The majority of participants would take part in further Wisdom Councils even though the initial skepticism or the time investment were discouraging.

### 3.1.2 TRANSPARENCY WITHIN

Transparency within is closely connected with the above text. By this we mean, how successfully the concerns and the significance of the Wisdom Councils can be made clear to the public.

The observations and interviews showed that a majority of the later participants did not really understand the concern of the Wisdom Council they joined. The question remains whether this is necessary for the successful implementation of a Wisdom Council. Such unclear moments or situations are not necessarily problematic for the success. On the contrary, the initial curiosity and ambiguity may probably lead to a greater breadth in perspectives generated during the encounter. On the other hand, it is this ambiguity which leads many persons to decline the invitation.

A sensitive balancing and further development of the public relations work on the method and invitation process can lead to more clarity.

It is important to note that once the Wisdom Council is concluded the desired transparency is achieved. All participants are clear about who invited, which role the Wisdom Council plays in the decision-making process (even though individuals may wish for more decision-making competence) and which task has been set.

Skeptic participants often commented on the motivation of the inviting institutions.

*„Those up have no more answers. Now the citizens are being taken seriously. Whether that will change anything...?“*

Remarkable is, on the other hand, that by the end of the Wisdom Council the transparency is satisfactory enough and leads to an increased responsiveness - even in the case of the skeptics. Nearly all would take part in a further event. Regardless of a change in their skeptical attitude.

The most important condition for the high transparency and the constructive attitude, also in the case of the skeptics, is the random selection. This legitimizes the participants and prevents speculations about a strategic selection of the participants. It prevents skeptics seeing their invitation as a strategic move, allowing them to work but holding them back from any decision-making. And it also helps the group's awareness of being the result of the same randomness. This dampens the usual spokespeople and supports others, less familiar with making their voice heard in public, by creating awareness about the equality of their comments.

This significance of randomness does carry two small dangers. On the one hand, by by-passing the randomness through personal invitations during the follow-up, the randomness principle is decreased which reduces the level of trust should this be known. On the other side, it helps those who appear not to be invited to

legitimize their presence. Here, there have been cases where the invitation has been passed around within the family. Thereby distorting the gender balance to the disadvantage of the female participants.

### Special case "Reflecting Team"

In some cases the transparency was less high. In particular, the inviting institution, client and role of the Wisdom Council were misunderstood. These cases are closely connected with the so called "Reflecting Team". Some Wisdom Councils included one - quite often more - observers, who were invited into the circle at different times during the procedure to reflect on the process so far.

From the view point of the evaluation the significance of the Reflecting Teams for the success of the Wisdom Councils is negligible. But the observers did create a false perspective of the Wisdom Council in the eyes of the participants. The Wisdom Council clients were named as the "Ministry of Life" and the "Local Government Office", etc. whereas in actual fact it was a municipal process and the observers were representatives from the above mentioned institutions. Quite often this generated expectations directed at the observing persons and their institutions. This counterproductive for the process and, in particular, for awakening self-responsibility among the participants.

### **3.1.3 INCLUSIVENESS**

The issue about inclusiveness is aimed at answering the question whether 'all participants are really taking part' during the process. The participating observation monitored, during the whole Wisdom Council, the distribution of the speaking time per participant. To check this, an entire Wisdom Council was recorded digitally. This external impression was compared with the participant's answers to the question as to what degree they were part of the process, how they saw themselves as a group and how they contributed to the results.

*„Not to speak up, is not possible.“*

Naturally, there are people who participate openly and actively in conversations and others who are more hesitant and reserved. For many group facilitation methods this problem of different levels of articulation is the greatest challenge.

The Wisdom Councils showed that although the speaking times could vary considerably. Despite this, the feeling of "being involved" was constantly comparable.

### Qualitative instead of quantitative inclusiveness

In this sense, the conclusion is that the method provides no quantitative inclusiveness; equal speaking time and a similar number of contributions. But that at the same time the personal involvement during the whole process is highly comparable and the majority of participants had the feeling of having contributed all they wanted to.

The facilitation is pivotal in this regard. The method allows the facilitator to follow individuals and their energy in a concentrated form. Giving individual participants a long time to speak, supporting them in their articulation and, thereby, ensuring that the person's concern is addressed and made visible to the group. Interestingly, the speaking time is less important. The main thing is that the participants have the feeling of "having got to the point".

The systematic questions directed at individuals concerning their issues and the focus on each participant and each facilitator slows down the communication within the group and forces the rather more extrovert participants into active listening. It also gives the individual the feeling of being heard and noticed.

At the same time, it generates the feeling of a strong connectedness with the group (see also chapter 3.1.5). And so the group's identification with each other is not so much based on the collective result they produce but already during the shared conversational process closely supported by the facilitator.

With regards to the participants, it creates trust and the invitation to express personal statements on issues which they usually do during the process.

### **3.1.4 QUALITY of the COMMUNICATION PROCESS**

The Wisdom Council method combines two different process forms. On the one hand, a dialogic exchange without focussing on a concrete result or specific question. It provides all participants with a platform for exploring and formulating their very individual concerns. On the other hand, the methodological requirement to produce a joint statement at the end of a Wisdom Council, which can then be presented to other committees.

Therefore, the quality of the communication process is of special importance. Many questions (see appendix) focussed on this quality from different perspectives.

For Jim Rough, the creator of the "Dynamic Facilitation" method, this new way of communicating is of great value. He calls the intended thought process "choice creating"; in a sense, the art of collective and collaborative thinking which produces new possibilities and choices. This is in contrast to many other methods, that focus on evaluating alternatives and deciding between them. The essence of Wisdom Councils is to work on the really important challenges. The collective thought processes allow the development of new choices which are the result of so called "shifts"; moments of change in the collective awareness of the issue.

These assumptions, which are an integral part of the method, define the quality of a Wisdom Council and seem as if "all participants have been joined into a single brain". The "shifts" can be described as sudden group insights, which activate collective thinking and working, and which lead to new solutions.

### High individual assessment of the process quality

From the individual's point of view the quality of the communication process received very high marks. The groups had the impression that the desire for reciprocal understanding was above average. Interestingly, a number of participants highlighted their own learning process as the following statement shows. The conclusion is that the method not only provides interesting constellations of a communication process but also has a role to play in individual learning. Most probably this is a methodological result of having to listen to individuals for a protracted time.

„...one often has to listen for some time to understand what others are trying to say.“

Again, one of the most important conditions for this to happen is the Wisdom Council facilitation. Facilitation seems to be an essential driver for the deliberation process. In addition to the already mentioned facts, the authenticity of the facilitator plays an important role. A creative approach to the method and flexible adaptations during the process have proven to be more productive than adhering strictly to the methodology. In some cases, for example, Wisdom Councils have also been split into subgroups each led by one facilitator. In the original methodology, this is not intended, but it proved to be an important decision so as to continue a productive process.

What has been observed in all cases and what can be determined from the participants' responses is that the facilitation as well as the method itself create a good conversational atmosphere. In the particular case of high conflict issues, the most important result of the Wisdom Council was the fact that the dialogue capability and atmosphere were improved. And this went far beyond the immediate Wisdom Council participants. The resolution of the issue is then often a secondary part of the process.

Wisdom Councils with pre-determined issues usually have a higher communication quality than open-topic Wisdom Councils; the same applies to processes with a more heterogenous participant group compared to a more homogenous group.

### Heterogeneity as Key

The significance of participant heterogeneity was already mentioned in 3.1.1.. The analysis of the communication process itself produced further aspects which point towards the need for a high heterogeneity.

The satisfaction with the communication process was especially low in the case of participants who were alone in their (age and gender) group and were dominated by another, rather more homogenous, group. This usually applied to younger people, who were nearly always underrepresented (except in the case of the Sulzberg youth council). Quite often they were unable to express their opinion against the majority of older participants.

#### Fixed theme/issue simplifies group process

The feeling of “becoming one working brain” usually happened where the Wisdom Council had a pre-determined issue to work on. This is not surprising since a fixed issue provides a focus for the participants. The above mentioned sudden insights occurred less frequently. The group process itself, as observed during events, must be seen as less successful than the individual assessments and learning effects.

On the other hand, a Wisdom Council can truly unfold its potential where there is no fixed issue and the original concern of the Wisdom Council is forthcoming: To follow the people’s energy and to discover their ‘most pressing issues’. Here, unfortunately, the invitation text is too abstract and the responses too few. This framework is, therefore, difficult to create. More development work is needed here.

Remarkable is, that the static format of the Wisdom Council method has a positive impact on the success. One and a half days of more or less sitting in one place, listening to others, and delegating activities (such as taking note of solutions, information, concerns and problem statements on flip charts) to the facilitators is, generally, no barrier to a successful process. Although it is contrary to many other group facilitation processes.

With regards to the quality of the communication processes it can be concluded that Wisdom Councils are capable of differentiating between positions and interests. The method is suited for discovering the underlining themes, problems and interests of a standpoint. A Wisdom Council has, therefore, a superior quality with regards to the communication process compared to classic approaches of majority decision-making.

### **3.1.5 CONNECTEDNESS**

The idea behind the random selection and the wish to have the highest possible group heterogeneity is to emphasize the common good perspective of the Wisdom Councils. This also sets the method apart from other participatory and group decision-making methods. But as a consequence it is a challenge to create connectedness within this heterogenous group of people. Much that was described in chapter 3.1.3 will be summarized here and presented from the perspective of the group and its cohesion.

The most important and most prominent result is the degree of connectedness of

the Wisdom Council participant group. From a randomly selected group of people, who usually do not know each other, have different interests and belong to different social groups, emerges, in all observed cases, a group of people who are capable of following a common interest and are able to come up with recommendations how to develop this issue further. On the other hand, this connectedness is much weaker and shorter in duration than the very special feeling of "being integrated" that was discussed in chapter 3.1.3.

The main motivation for coming together as a group is the implicit "feeling of responsibility towards the community". The random selection and heterogenous constellation strengthens this feeling. The connectedness feeling was significantly higher among the older participants and less pronounced among the younger participants. Due to the lower number of younger participants, it is not possible to determine whether the lacking feeling of connectedness among younger people is the result of being so few in numbers and that therefore their issues had less impact than the interests of older participants.

A crucial factor in creating this group feeling is certainly the one and a half day duration of a Wisdom Council. This is an usually long period of time for an intensive conversation and is a prerequisite for the development of a group feeling. The competence of the facilitators also plays an important role in connecting with the group and the individuals and contributing to the discovery of differences as well as common ground.

Probably the greatest limitation is a natural part of the method. A Wisdom Council is, from the start, limited in time and has no intention of working continuously with the same participants. This decision on the level of commitment is reflected in the group's connectedness once the Wisdom Council has ended. With a few exceptions and a few chance meetings, the contact between the participants is limited to the duration of the Wisdom Council (including the Citizens Cafe).

### **3.1.5.1 EFFECTIVENESS**

All participatory methods are designed, among other things, to give citizens the feeling (and sense of security) that they are able to make a difference. Trying to determine the impact on the effectiveness of the participants was, therefore, an important research criteria.

"...we could express ourselves, were listened to and, therefore, had an impact on decision-makers."

Of special interest are the Wisdom Councils that address a specific issue. In these cases the motivation to participate was closely connected to the topic on discussion. Quite often it was a personal interest (and even the perceived interest of a group) which led people initially to participate.

Despite the initial issue-related interest, during the process of the Wisdom

Council the expected effect of the participants changed. No longer is the personal interest at stake. Instead, the improvement of the dialogue and debate culture, the democratization of the decision-making processes, the improvement of the social relationships and the mutually respectful understanding of each other are seen as the main positive effect. Chapter 3.2 will look more closely at the fact that the participants saw the quality of the results of a Wisdom Council less in connection with the statement and a concrete project order than with the culture of being together. This was seen as the basis for successful participation and common action. And this is exactly how most of the participants felt after the Wisdom Council.

With regards to the value of self-efficacy, a Wisdom Council creates something like "the foundation for becoming self-effective". The seemingly contradictory feeling that remains can be expressed as: "I can have an effect - even though my participation during a Wisdom Council has not produced anything concrete right now".

One can also experience this quality when reflecting on the participant's mood. At the start of the Wisdom Council the atmosphere was one of "curiosity and hope". In the process of the Wisdom Council it changed to "enthusiasm". By the end of the Wisdom Council and especially during the Citizens Cafe the main mood centered around "the feeling of being appreciated and acknowledged for the work and effort".

Although skeptical participants expressed the feeling of powerlessness by the end of the Wisdom Council, those with a positive disposition continuously felt "encouraged to become active".

### 3.1.6 LEARNING PROCESS

During the research preparation, and in communication with the clients, it was evident that the individual and collective learning effect during a Wisdom Council would be an important success factor.

This became evident immediately after the Wisdom Council while asking about personal sudden insights and during interviews a couple of months after the end of the process. The responses highlight two central findings.

„I have learnt something for life.“

#### Realizing complexity

An important insight for most of the participants, who experienced a learning effect, was the awareness and acceptance of a high complexity with regards to social challenges. The method hardly allows one to maintain a standpoint

indefinitely and ignore all other points of view. The compact time and personal intensity of a Wisdom Council inevitably leads to other points of argument being picked up and heard. Something that would not occur during the usual discussions, especially with a large group heterogeneity which does not support the formation of group opinions.

Wisdom Councils with a reduced learning effect had a lower heterogeneity and, therefore, either individual arguments were not heard by the unified majority view points of the other participants or individuals finally gave up their own opinions when confronted by the different majority opinion. In both cases a learning chance was lost.

As discussed below, the Wisdom Council results clearly show that the complexity of the issues are sufficiently covered. The fear that allowing "lay people" to work on an issue will invariably lead to "inexpert" results is unfounded.

Significantly, even most of the more critical participants believe that they have had an effect by taking part or, at least, that they learnt something from taking part in the Wisdom Council. The interviews conducted some months after the participation relativized this connection some what. Only where concrete actions were involved did the insight about the personal learning effect remain present.

#### Insights about the capabilities of a group

The second important result is the surprising and hopeful realization that randomly selected people, who do not know each other and originate from different walks of life, can reach a common result which is usually supported by most of the group.

As already mentioned in 3.1.4, a Wisdom Council places great emphasis on personal learning. To experience how reciprocal active listening and the desire to understand each other can lead a whole group to mutual positions, which are supported by all, was highlighted by some participants as the most significant personal learning effect.

Beyond this, issue-orientated insights are less significant. Very few expanded their issue-specific knowledge. And the expected aha-experiences of the group, as well as the individual, were lower than expected. About a quarter of the interviewed participants saw such insight effects in the group. Although this was usually the case when the view point of others was adopted or when a whole group reached a mutual position.

In conclusion one can say that within the key areas of learning, such as creating an atmosphere of openness, questioning one's own assumptions and adopting other peoples' perspectives, the Wisdom Council method is very promising. A learning attitude is created which changes the view of the world and society. This means that the process itself is particularly important for the participants independently of the actual result of the Wisdom Council.

## 3.2 The Resulting Effects

### 3.2.1 QUALITY of the RESULTS

Usually, the first thought about a Wisdom Council leads the client as well as the public to focus on the mutual statement based on the randomly selected participants. For the observing public, who have heard about the Wisdom Council but have neither taken part or been present during the Citizens Cafe, the final statement is what they measure the quality of the Wisdom Council by.

Documenting and evaluating the "solution", i.e. the resulting statement of a Wisdom Council, was seen as an important aspect during the preparation of this research. Yet, the above mentioned distinctive process qualities already show that reducing the observation effects on the jointly formulated statement is misdirected.

In this sense, the central question of the evaluation was reformulated from the original aspect of "solution quality" to the "quality of outcomes". This opens a fundamental question of whether the outcome of a Wisdom Council contains a "solution" in the classic sense; an assailable, implementable, concrete action; or whether the quality of the outcome is more impressive and visible in other areas.

„...it did not result in something concrete.... but it was decisive.“

As mentioned earlier, the results of Wisdom Councils have a key mutuality: the complexity of the issue is seen and realized. The results are never "lay" although they are have been worked out by "lay people". They are concerned with, in particular, with principles, processes and atmosphere, and are less focussed on the technical conditions and feasibility.

In effect, the Wisdom Council method disarms a further fear which has been expressed in advance of a Wisdom Council: "How can unqualified people develop a solution without understanding the costs and technical feasibility?"

The observed results of Wisdom Councils continuously show that the results do not focus on the technical realization. Instead they produce fundamental conditions which would be a prerequisite for developing technical solutions. Despite this, from the evaluation's point of view the results of a Wisdom Council must cover at least one of the following two conditions so as to prevent the participant's (and client's) frustration:

- The result includes a useful solution that can be implemented;
- The result triggers further explorations, which might lead to a solution. At the very least it should produce further actions.

Follow-up interviews with specific participants, a number of months after the Wisdom Council, showed that the majority of participants were of the opinion that "the results were not implemented". It appears that the invitation to a Wisdom Council triggers the expectation that "the results will be applied". In some cases - especially when the discussed issue was very concrete - steps were taken which led to a higher participant satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is important that the participants themselves evaluate the quality of their results in a positive way. Significantly, more than half of the participants judged the final statement as a new, innovative and comprehensive solution and usually provided reasons for this. The reasons were often based on the above mentioned process qualities and the "soft" result factors. These were given considerable significance.

In conclusion one can say that the key quality of the Wisdom Council outcomes is not so much the statement or the formulated solution. Instead, it is the activating moment,

- of seeing things in a wider context and being able to take different viewpoints, and
- of seeing oneself in the role of the designer and being aware of the responsibility for the day to day actions which contribute to the solution of required tasks.

The accompanying evaluation could determine both these factors. The first point with regards to most participants, the second in many cases.

The descriptions above are of special interest for Wisdom Council clients who have the challenging task of appreciating the process qualities of the outcomes. They also need to consider concrete steps with which to build on this well-prepared social ground. This becomes more difficult as one moves away from the original group of participants. People taking part in the Citizens Cafe still get a good impression of the qualities of the results of a Wisdom Council. For outsiders the results are often hard to assess. Usually the emergent atmosphere can be grasped and assessed, a connection with the effects of the Wisdom Council become more and more difficult.

### 3.2.2 EFFECTS on the DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

A community, region or other entity usual organizes a Wisdom Council for a specific purpose. Ideally, this reflects the concern for a new political culture of participation, which operates complementary to existing decision-making structures. It can support the existing structures even more, when seen as an opportunity instead of a threat.

In light of the first implementations, this did not always succeed. The method also creates expectations and fears. During the first critical phase of expansion of such a method, these considerations must be taken serious and worked on.

„Why do we now still need a municipal council?“

*Comment prior to a Citizens Cafe*

What is little seen, is the actual role of the Wisdom Council as a preparation for participation and in forming the ground for democratic processes. Because the Wisdom Council, as an explorative method, is superior to a municipal council / municipal representatives (or the equivalent authorities at city, district, region and state level), these institutions see competition and experience existential fear. Although this is unfounded, since exploration has, so far, not been part of any formal political institution, it is, nevertheless, understandable. Even more so in the beginning as much is expected of the new method.

There is a danger inherent in expecting too much from the process. Naturally, it will be unable to fulfill all expectations, but will, in the end, be measured by this fact.

The role of a Wisdom Council, within a decision-making process, is rather as part of an unconditional consultancy. Even when - as described above - there is a danger that the failure to implement the results may cause frustration among the participants. A Wisdom Council dissolves once the Citizens Cafe is concluded. Decision-makers have no further reporting or legal obligation towards this group. This is exactly the reason why it is important to find suitable approaches for making the further handling of the results transparent for the participants - in whatever way possible. Ideally, over a longer time period, e.g. one year.

„I noticed how sympathetic and appreciative the municipal council members were towards our suggestions during the Citizens Cafe.“

The possibility of presenting the results during a Citizens Cafe is already the first important measure. The more political decision-makers are present and seriously discuss the results, the better.

What the Wisdom Council participants definitely need is enough appreciation for their time and effort.

### **3.2.3 PUBLIC AWARENESS**

The participant interviews could only indirectly provide insights into the public opinion. The appraisal, which the participants had of their own Wisdom Council with regards to the public awareness was generally poor. This confirms the above mentioned impression that the more distance people have to the Wisdom Council process, the more distorted and reduced the awareness of the process and results are.

One reason for this is that the media coverage about a Wisdom Council is very difficult and is counter to the usual media procedure. It requires a specific kind of communication that covers the depths of the process qualities which can not be

provided by brief news items. Despite this, the outcomes and the Wisdom Council method are well suited for external communication.

An example for such in-depth reporting is offered by "Kontext: Wochenzeitung", a weekly newspaper. Under the heading "Elf Fremde" (eleven strangers), the paper provided a multiple page, comprehensive report about the Wisdom Council<sup>ii</sup>.

The participant interviews led to the result that about 50% of the participants believed the public awareness about their Wisdom Council to be low and had the impression that it did not reflect the actual outcomes. A more positive view was provided by another part of the participants, especially those from small municipalities and with issue-specific Wisdom Councils. These are, by nature, easier to communicate and their results can be more readily brought into context.

### 3.2.4 CIVIC EDUCATION, DEMOCRATIC SKILLS

The actual strength of the Wisdom Council method showed itself in most of the chapters above. It touches people emotionally, helps them to openly hear and adopt the viewpoints of others, makes it possible to grasp the complexity of social challenges and helps participants to discover the difference between a position and the underlying interests.

Therefore, the method has the greatest strength in the area of political and civic education.

"We arrived as individuals and departed as a collective."

The group process already highlights the strength and constructive power of a group of randomly selected people as opposed to the opinion of individuals. The theme or personal issue definition, usually, surfaces the actual core challenges, and not small individual tasks which would be better off in the hands of a planner.

And during the processing of the issues, it became evident that the participants jointly realized the complexity and also understood the difficulty of taking 'correct' actions. This realization usually lead to the conclusion that their own actions are decisive and not just the delegation of responsibility. The self-effectiveness during and immediately after the Wisdom Council were seen as very high.

An important insight for many active participants was that civic engagement is possible and meaningful outside of political parties. This area, especially, has received little - even decreasing - attention in the democratic process.

A Wisdom Council is, therefore, an instrument for civic education and a powerful discovery method which is superior to many other formats.

## 4 Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the research project is to test the possibilities and limits of the "Wisdom Council" method. The above pages include many insights from the observations of five Wisdom Councils and the interviews with participants and organizers. Finally, the most important outcomes will be summarized as conclusions and recommendations.

Today, especially, when the gulf between citizens and political decision-makers appears to be dramatically increasing, and numerous new forms of activation and participation are emerging, it is important to analyze, evaluate and compare the different approaches. A single method for different requirements is unlikely. Today, for example, the importance and necessity of public participation reaches far beyond the boundaries of a community, city, district or state. The formation of international interest groups<sup>iii</sup> and campaigns highlight this fact superbly.

On the other hand, it is also evident that personal action - often presented as active citizenship - is more and more motivated by a strong self-interest and that the public welfare is not automatically the most essential motivation for engagement<sup>iv</sup>.

By now, the phenomena of "Wut-BürgerInnen" (angry citizens) is attached to more and more protest demonstrations. Remarkably, the research by the Göttingen Institut für Demokratieforschung (Institute for Democracy Research Göttingen) showed that today's active citizens are between 46-65 years old instead of 25-45 years as they used to be. They are, in the most cases, well informed, highly educated and their motivation is not entirely selfless. They include, for example, property and real estate owners for whom the real estate prices are just as important as the common welfare.

The gulf between citizens and decision-makers as well as the increasingly obvious active citizenship, with more than just public welfare motifs, show that it is more important than ever to work on participatory public welfare methods, to discover new ones, to test them and, where appropriate, to bring them into use.

In this context, the Wisdom Council is very promising and its expansion - in this case within Austria - can be supported and facilitated with further development steps.

### 4.1 CHALLENGES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Central tasks relevant for the further development and dissemination of the method are:

- a. The development of a sustainable selection process which will help to overcome skepticism or the implementation barrier imposed by time constraints. On the one hand, this can be achieved through conventional advertising or through suitable - possibly even legal - frameworks which emphasize this kind of public involvement and which provides a binding framework for participation. For example, a binding regulation for the use of the central residents registry for generating the random selection would be helpful.
- b. Within this context, alternative approaches to the invitation and the formulation of the concern should be followed. Written invitations are often too abstract to communicate the opportunities of participation to - so far - uninvolved people. A personal approach is very time-consuming but does offer the possibility of reacting directly to skepticism or incorrect understanding of the method and the invitation. A considerably higher response could be the result. Indirectly, this approach is already in practice as the persons responsible for the follow up usually choose the personal approach.
- c. This is especially relevant for Wisdom Councils without a pre-determined issue or theme. Finding a suitable formulation to communicate the concern in a simple and understandable way so as to increase the responses to the invitation remains a challenge.
- d. Wisdom Council observers should be treated in a sensitive way. Although it is part of the method that politically responsible persons are present during the welcoming round and now and again during the closure; they should not take part in the actual Wisdom Council so as not to influence the outcome and let the citizens do their work. The presence of observers - especially when the role and meaning is unclear and there are quite a few present - is not beneficial and leads to a reduced transparency among the participants. Helpful is a limitation to one or two observers with a clearly stated role.
- e. The positioning and communication of the results is an important challenge. How can the atmosphere and quality of the process be communicated alongside the actual statement? A reduced distribution of the statement, outside of the context of the process qualities, often appears abstract and arbitrary. It makes it difficult for people who were not part of the process to see the value of the Wisdom Council. Predominantly, the people who came in contact with the process have been inspired and touched. This is not a special problem of the Wisdom Council method and is inherent in many methods of public participation. None the less, the communication of the results is one of the most important challenges for more internal and external transparency.
- f. An important task is to find possibilities of highlighting the continual processing of the Wisdom Council results to the participants over an extended period of time. At the same time, this task is highly sensitive as it should not give the impression that the committee is still active or that any kind accountability or reporting is necessary. Despite this, a

comprehensive and long term feedback process does ensure a level of appreciation which can strengthen the activating moment of the Wisdom Council and which, therefore, supports the key effectiveness of a Wisdom Council.

- g. The further dissemination of the method should be done in a prudent way. Applications should, if possible, emerge from the local situation or as a consequence of the (preferably in-depth) communication of good practice examples. An organic growth reflects the appropriate local energy and expectations results in further stable implementations. Inspiration for the method should concentrate on the training of multipliers and the intensive and in-depth spreading of implementation experience and examples. The Wisdom Council method can not be prescribed top-down.
- h. Financial support for the implementation can reduce the barrier for hosting Wisdom Councils. It should be orientated on the financial strength of the relevant committees (community, city, district, state) and should not release the political and administrative decision-makers from their assigned responsibility.

## 4.2 ABOUT THE METHOD AND FACILITATION

The facilitation of a Wisdom Council is personally demanding, strenuous and follows a course specific to the method. On the one hand there is a great rigidity and lack of actual movement. On the other hand, the opening of the deep conversational field, which facilitates the above mentioned "emergence of choice-creating" among the participants. Therefore, the Wisdom Council or Dynamic Facilitation method is less an approach to be learned. Rather, it must strongly reflect the individual facilitation personality. For a successful use, it should be applied creatively in the overall context and as part of a toolbox of facilitation methods. Otherwise there is the real danger of slavishly following the method's blueprint and, thereby, overlooking what is the most important aspect; to focus on the energy of the participants. The most important prerequisite for the successful facilitation of a Wisdom Council is to be in contact with the group and follow the participant's energy.

Therefore, further options and effort will be required to train additional Wisdom Council facilitators so as to ensure a larger number of active and experienced facilitators in the mid-term future.

## 4.3 WISDOM COUNCIL AS PARTICIPATION PREPARATION

The Wisdom Council method is excellent as a preparation for participation. It builds the competences which we need for taking part in social processes and

empowers the participants to tackle the core problems of society with courage and with trust in the ability of cooperatively working on constructive solutions.

There are already a large number of participation instruments and methods for public involvement in decision-making processes. The question is, whether the public has the skills and will to actually take part in these processes.

In this case, the Wisdom Council method is situated at an interesting and important junction. On the one hand it is a method for political and civic education, on the other hand a powerful exploration method for decision-making, or rather, decision-making preparation.

The strengths of the Wisdom Council method lie in the process, in the trust in the collective knowledge and the realization that randomly selected people, who work together on major challenges, can reach a mutual agreement which is holistic, reasonable and innovative.

Only the formulated statement itself, which is the seemingly central result at the end of a Wisdom Council, should not be overestimated. It does bring together the results of the process for all who participated. Together with the so called "storyline" or "story", it summarizes the conversational flow of the group and represents the most important insights. For external persons, the statement is often too abstract and difficult to comprehend.

This study shows that the effects of the method, and its application, are clearly positive when they are applied to the participants and their immediate surroundings. Further impacts on society could not be determined due to the limited time period and dimension of the research project. It is clear that the method has great potential for contributing to fostering a participatory atmosphere in society and among political decision-makers.

# **PART II**

# **Appendix**

## 5 Indicators with Operationalization

A selection of the applied indicators and their implementation for the “Participant’s Interviews”

PROCESS				
Representation	Age	Gender	Education	Migration background
Inclusiveness	Share of speaking	Share in presentation time	Feeling of having contributed their own opinion	Assessment of the own role in the group
Quality of deliberation	(Indirectly via transparency and inclusiveness)	Assessment of the quality of facilitation		
Transparency within	Understanding of significance, task and role directly before the Wisdom Council	Assessment of next steps immediately after the Wisdom Council	Reflexions on the significance 6 months after the Wisdom Council	
Self-effectiveness	Assessment of the significance of the Wisdom Council as political participation			
Connectedness	Awareness of Wisdom Council as a group			
Learning process of the participants	Assessment of the personal learning effect			

EFFECT				
Quality of solutions	Assessment of the quality of the achieved results	Assessment of the effect of the results after 6 months		
Effects on political decision-makers and clients	Expectation with regards to political implementation	Assessment of implementation after 6 months		
Public awareness	Satisfaction with media coverage	Response from the public after 6 months		

Civic education of participants, democracy skills	Awareness of self-responsibility immediately before the Wisdom Council	Awareness of self-responsibility after the Wisdom Council	Awareness of self-responsibility 6 months after the Wisdom Council	Self-organized group meetings after the Wisdom Council
Mobilization of participants	Assessment of the effects on one's own life	Contact with other participants with regards to political issues following the Wisdom Council		
Costs / benefits	Assessment of one's own time and effort after the Wisdom Council	Assessment of the benefit of the Wisdom Council immediately after the Wisdom Council		

This resulted in a list of questions which were used for the interview by telephone, in person or electronically (by email or online questionnaire). A list of questions for the participant interviews are given as an example.

Interviews with political decision-makers and other key actors used an interview guide as well as following the argumentations of the interviewed person. Therefore, they are difficult to compare as well as forming the background for the analysis in the above chapters. Due to the small number of assessed Wisdom Councils, a quantitative approach made no sense.

	Criterion			Question
<b>A Process</b>				
A1	Composition of the participant group "description of the awareness body"		A1.1	How many participants took part in the Wisdom Council for how long?
			A1.2	How "random" was the selection?
			A1.3	Why did people take part? Why did others not take part?
			A1.4	Which stakeholders were part of the group?
A2	Transparency within, "Knowledge of the Larger Picture"		A2.1	Why this Wisdom Council?
			A2.2	Are the clients and their interests known?

			A2.3	What will the Wisdom Council achieve?
			A2.4	Who is participating? Who uses the results?
A3	Inclusion "Switches to a collective mind"		A3.1	Observation: listening - agreeing
			A3.2	Observation: oral comments
			A3.3	Observation: line of sight, attention
			A3.4	Do I feel part of the group?
			A3.5	Do I feel that I can express myself at all times?
			A3.6	I have the feeling that we are thinking together
A4	Connectedness to the whole, common welfare perspective		A4.1	What did you experience during the Wisdom Council? (Create questions from this? When, for which occasion, what happens next,..)
			A4.2	Do you feel connected to the group? How? When?
			A4.3	In your view, who does the group represent? (Region, city, town, humanity,...)
			A4.4	In your view, who's interests does the group represent? (Individual, common, fictive, lobby groups, etc)
A5	Quality of the change processes		A5.1	When X says something, I feel that he/she is also speaking for me
			A5.2	Observation: does the "purging" work
			A5.3	Observation: Did an aha-effect occur?
			A5.4	Are you content with the group results and the atmosphere?
			A5.5	Who's opinion does the result represent?

			A5.6	Were you always in agreement with the others? Was there a moment when everything made sense?
A6	Individual self-effectiveness "the feeling of being able to change something"		A6.1	Are you able to have an impact?
			A6.2	Do you have the feeling of participating in something that will have an effect?
			A6.3	Has participating in the Wisdom Council increased your influence?
A7	What effect does the process have on me?		A7.1	Did you adopt the points of view of other participants?
			A7.2	Were people open towards you?
			A7.3	How has the process affected you?
B1	Quality of statements		B1.1	Is the statement...(new-old, innovative-conventional, well-behaved-naughty, naive-thought-through, important-unimportant, comprehensive-one-dimensional)
			B1.2	Does the statement contain a solution?
			B1.3	How is the solution?
B2	Influence on decision-making processes		B2.1	Reconstruction: What influence does the statement/solution have on decision-making processes?
			B2.2	What was achieved with the Wisdom Council result?
B3	Public awareness		B3.1	How strong was the public awareness of the Wisdom Council?
			B3.2	How "correct" was the public awareness of the Wisdom Council?
			B3.3	Which aspects of the Wisdom Council were noticed?
			B3.4	How do media reports see the value of the Wisdom Council?

B4	Perception of decision-makers towards Wisdom Councils as a method		B4.1	What do you think of the Wisdom Council as a method?
			B4.2	How do you view the results of the Wisdom Council?
B5	How has the process affected me?		B5.1	If you compare the difference before and after the Wisdom Council: how has the process affected you?
			B5.2	Do you approach things differently than before the Wisdom Council?
			B5.3	How have my actions changed due to the Wisdom Council?

i Office for Future-related Questions, 2010: Der BürgerInnen Rat. Eine Informations- und Arbeitsmappe, Bregenz. Page 3

ii Eva Wolfangel, Mario Wezel (Fotos): „Elf Fremde“ on 7.9.2011 found on the page [http://www.kontextwochenzeitung.de/no\\_cache/newsartikel/2011/07/elf-fremde](http://www.kontextwochenzeitung.de/no_cache/newsartikel/2011/07/elf-fremde)

iii Here we mention, as an example, the campaign network Avaaz ([www.awaaz.org](http://www.awaaz.org)), which, according to its own statement, has more than 10 million members worldwide. They, increasingly, apply democratic principles in deciding upon their issues.

iv The Institute for Democracy Research Göttingen present two studies, which the media ran with the title „Engagierte Bürger oder NIMBY's?“ (Active Citizens or NIMBY's) ([www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de) mid September 2011). They looked at the motifs behind the Stuttgart 21 and Berlin-Brandenburg airport protests. (NIMBY stands for “not in my backyard”).