

Wisdom Councils in Europe Glean Citizen Input

Image



Councils beginning to spread as governments support and fund them

From determining how best to receive refugees to reviewing a large urban development project, Wisdom Councils offer a unique way to engage the insights of citizens on local, regional or state issues.

First used in 2006 in the Austrian city of Wolfurt, Wisdom Councils now take place primarily in Vorarlberg state, Austria, though they have also been held in other places in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

Wisdom Councils are described as a practical application of an approach called Dynamic Facilitation. In their chapter on the subject, “Wisdom Councils in the public

sector,” authors Manfred Hellrigl and Michael Lederer refer to Dynamic Facilitation as a “fascinating approach to group facilitation that can be used in many different settings 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” (2014).

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One of the unique features of the Dynamic Facilitation is that the initial topic is only the starting point for the conversation. Often, as the group converses, they discover that the real issue is something else entirely than that originally identified. The facilitator responds by following the energy of the group, with the perspective that this is the surest way to generate appropriate solutions.

In a Wisdom Council, a group of about twelve to sixteen citizens will meet for a day and a half to explore a socially relevant issue. Citizens are selected at random based on the population register. It is not possible to volunteer for the Council.

The task of the Wisdom Council is to submit a shared statement (meaning all participants must stand behind it) within the given time-frame. The results of the Wisdom Council are then presented and discussed at a public event. After that, the

Wisdom Council is dissolved.

Though slowly becoming more common now, Wisdom Councils did not experience a quick uptake initially. It's been suggested that this had to do with the fact that their inventor, Jim Rough, was committed to the idea of citizens themselves recognizing the value of the method and then finding the ways and means to convene them.

This has not happened. Instead, the use of the Councils has started to spread as local governments have taken it upon themselves to support and fund them. In 2004, the Vorarlberg regional government became aware of the model and began using it as a way to develop political programs and strategies with the involvement of citizens.

Today in Vorarlberg, one to two Wisdom Councils occur each year at a state-wide level; in addition, between one and five Wisdom Councils take place at the local and/or regional level.

The decision to host a Wisdom Council comes from one of three sources:

- local or city council; the government;
- the state parliament or
- citizens with at least 1,000 signatures. (This happened for the first time in Vorarlberg last year.)

The Vorarlberg Office for Future Related Issues co-ordinates the occurrence of the Wisdom Councils, and is the link between citizens and administration/politicians. A team of nine staff in the office dedicates about 20 per cent of their time to work on the Wisdom Councils. The Office for Future Related Issues funds the councils.

To learn more about Wisdom Councils, visit [this resource](#).

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Reference:

Hellrigl, M. & Lederer, M. (2014), "Wisdom Councils im öffentlichen Bereich", in R. Zubizarreta and M. zur Bonsen (eds.) Dynamic Facilitation: Die erfolgreiche Moderations methode für schwierige und verfahrenre Situationen. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag. Chapter translated into English by Rosa Zubizarreta.