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From Consumers to Citizens, a new culture of engagement, trust and collaboration

Overview

This lecture describes the approaches adopted by the Bureau for Future Studies (located in the Vorarlberg, Austria) in transforming and revitalising local democratic processes within the region. This involves shifting the primary population focus from that of consumers of policy and politics to that of citizens who are involved in defining and resolving difficult challenges. The lecture concluded by providing some examples of how this worked.

Summary

Vorarlberg and the Bureau for future studies

In his opening remarks, Manfred told us that the Vorarlberg region is in the western most part of Austria with Lake Konstanz in the north, Germany and Liechtenstein to the west and Switzerland to the south. Within an area of 2600 square kilometres there is a population of approximately 370,000 inhabitants living in 96 municipalities, each with a mayor and local self administration. The Bureau for Future Studies is a special unit within the state governor's office and has seven staff from diverse backgrounds. It has a budget of around 1.4 million euros per year. Although the Bureau's remit is broad it tends to work on three main issues: civil engagement, social capital and sustainable development.

Challenges

Lack of resources

Manfred said that while he might be expected to start with key global challenges like climate change, he suggested the key challenge is that government is 'running out of money'. Manfred thus posed the question 'how is government to fulfil its role with markedly fewer resources?' He suggested that this question arises as a symptom of a more fundamental trend whereby we are living far beyond our means and far beyond the planetary capability to support this style of life. Though these questions have been in the public domain for at least forty years, since the publication of the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth*, we tend to neglect them and no significant action has led to any real change. Metaphorically, the Titanic is still heading for the iceberg.

The political system is unable to address wicked problems such as sustainability

This raises a dilemma: if a government does what is necessary for sustainable development, it is unlikely to be re-elected. Manfred argued this is because 'sustainable policies' are generally unpopular. However following established policies is unsustainable and so the cycle continues. Trapped in this dilemma, politicians and the current political system, as a whole, appear unable to cope with the major challenges faced within 21st century life.

Citizens not consumers

Manfred argued that the present gap between citizens and government has widened because in the existing culture citizens are treated like customers by politicians. Citizens therefore behave like customers and become very demanding of a system which then tries to deliver what customers seem to want in order to be re-elected. This feeds/is fed by a deficit mindset. A deficit is identified and a solution/service/product is found and supplied. Within this dynamic citizens are not called upon to do anything but consume – meaning that society has less and less of a role for citizens and increasing importance is placed on 'experts', politicians and the economy. This leads to unnecessary competition within the political sphere, and significant human energy is focused on fighting others in different parties rather than parties co-operating to try and find the best way forward.

Systems in silos

Current public sector structures generally mean different departments for different issues. This may have been an appropriate approach for an earlier operating environment, but its effectiveness is highly questionable within the current environment. The challenges which we face today – social, economic, climate and demographic changes – do not respect these artificial boundaries.

Lobbyism

The characteristics of the current political system leave it vulnerable to lobbyism. Certain groups can have significant and disproportionate influence while other groups have no contact or influence. For example, it is well known that some laws are drafted by lobbyist groups and merely approved by the political process. Therefore, how can society remain cohesive when the centrifugal forces pulling it apart are becoming increasingly powerful? How can we identify those things we have in common, of which we share, so that they can be forces around which we can gather and make better decisions?

Manfred suggested that there needs a culture shift so that people are treated as active citizens and not merely passive consumers. To support this point, he showed data which suggest that European countries where social capital (as evidenced by volunteering) is high, appear to be less affected by the current economic recession.

How can active, engaged, collaborative citizens be developed?

Referring to Vorarlberg, Manfred pointed out that he has been attempting to address the question of how to support the development of actively and engaged citizens over the last 20 years. He has found the usual approach in which a few people made laws, policies, subsidies and awards, and regulations for the rest to follow did not work for this question. He gave a few examples which had been successful for a short while, such as cycling campaigns, but which lost their power and effectiveness after a few years.

He contrasted this with his Bureau's experience of working with an enthusiastic businessman who wanted to encourage active travel at his workplace. His ideas did not accord with Manfred and his colleagues. Subsequently, they did not take his views seriously.

Although this businessman did not have much money, within three or four years he had a significant impact within his company - 40% of his employees were actively travelling to work. His simple approach involved asking staff what needed to change to help them to cycle to work. The employees responded enthusiastically and he shared his insight with local government planners who were impressed and used the ideas to remove the barriers to change which employees had identified.

The Bureau learned two key lessons from this incident. Firstly, don't try and convince everyone to change but instead work with those with the abilities and enthusiasm for change, who can then have a systemic effect. Secondly, the motivation for such individuals is inner or self motivation towards their own goals. This he called self-organisation. People benefit from being supported to organise together to discover what they want.

This raised a number of questions. People do not like to be told what to do, yet a seismic shift is required if key challenges which we face are to be adequately addressed. What does it take to support and help to organise self organisation? What are the implications for how we work?

Examples

One of the first things the Bureau did was to stop talking about sustainable development and start talking about 'quality life' (in German 'a life worth living') – a term which had broader appeal. The Bureau then initiated a project on how to improve the quality of life, however defined by the population.

Langenegg

The first mayor to become involved was from the village of Langenegg. He had lots of ideas for improvement, but could not gain support in the village for these. The Bureau suggested, following its experience of the factory, the active travel issue described above. Instead of viewing the villagers as the problem, he should perhaps recognise the limitations of his own perspective of the problem. He had a strong

desire to define problems and identify solutions. The Bureau suggested he should allow citizens to develop ideas about what should be done, and he reluctantly agreed.

The mayor then selected 15 people at random and invited them to a conversation about how to improve the quality of life in Langenegg. The Bureau started this conversation by (i) suggesting to them that nobody outside the village was really interested in their quality of life and if it was to be improved villagers themselves would need to do it and (ii) offering support to discover how to do this. Having agreed to imagine improved quality of life in their own village, they agreed to meet two weeks later and each bring along two other villagers.

In total, 45 people discussed their quality of life and then made a list of the people in Langenegg whose gifts, talents and energies already contributed to it. To their surprise, they listed two such people in the village. This led to a celebratory event and the beginning of a project to improve the quality of village life. Fifteen years later, the amenities and resources of the village have multiplied - shops, doctor, grocery shop, post office etc. The efforts of the group have been recognised by national and international awards in many areas - energy, relationships, regeneration etc.

This approach has since been replicated in other towns and villages.

Child Friendliness

In 2004, the governor of the region asked the Bureau to discover how to become the most child friendly region in the world. Experience in Langenegg suggested that perhaps they could ask the citizens how to do this, rather than an expensive group of distant experts. They used citizens' jury methods and wrote to 2000 people - randomly selected in the region - inviting them to participate. Seventy five people agreed to take part. They also organised a future conference with 50 children and an open space meeting of experts too, as they were a little anxious that this method might not work! Using these three approaches was helpful as they could compare outcomes. The citizens' and children's ideas were equally as valuable as those of the experts and much easier to implement. This formed the basis of a programme called Children in the Middle (www.vorarlberg.at/kinderindiemitte German webpage only or [project file](#) for an EU description of the project in English).

Although this approach had elements of success, the citizen's jury process was deemed to be too expensive (200,000 euros) to be regularly used. The next step was to develop a similar approach which was both cheaper and quicker. They discovered this by using the wisdom council approach.

Wisdom Councils

In this approach, the idea is to work with a small number of randomly selected people (usually 12-16) who although not formally representative they do reflect a microcosm of the society of interest (in this case, Vorarlberg). With people by and large delighted to be invited, the process lasts a day and a half.

Two approaches to the wisdom council were developed. In the first approach the topic is not set before hand but decided by the council itself. The second approach involves a predetermined topic with the council generating creative discussion and insight. The wisdom council moves from a being a group of people who do not know each other to a group capable of making a unanimous statement on the issue. The statement from the council is then presented to a world cafe style meeting involving a larger number of people.

Bregenz waterfront project

The wisdom council process was used to elicit a citizen perspective on a waterfront project for the town of Bregenz. The mayor was keen for a constructive process following a difficult and unhelpful consultation on a previous harbour project.

The proposed 100 million Euro waterfront project would develop a strip of land between the city centre and Lake Konstanz. The citizens suggested that this represented an opportunity to connect the city centre to the lake for the first time in 100 years. The town planners said they had already thought of this and had included an underpass. Citizens suggested that they would prefer a bridge which had Spanish steps so that people could relax there and watch the sunset. This was agreed and the bridge is due for completion at the end of this year.

Conclusions

Manfred summarised his talk by restating that the usual dichotomy of problem/solution was inadequate for the environment in which we now live and work. He suggested instead that a deeper understanding of the challenges ahead needs to be developed. These included additional stages involving deeper engagement built upon identification and acceptance of the dilemmas and limitations posed by the current hierarchical and paternalistic political and public sector approaches. Without this shift, the role of politics and politicians is likely to become increasingly difficult, progressively more irrelevant and ineffective in addressing quality of life challenges.

To conclude, Manfred identified three important shifts he feels that are required based on his experiences in Vorarlberg: firstly, the development of a shared sense of responsibility among citizens, rather than the current disconnected and distant consumers of government policy; secondly, the (re)building of trust among citizens, politicians and public sector organisations; and thirdly embedding creative and democratic processes which enable the development of a shared vision from which new and more effective ways of addressing wicked problems could emanate.

These shifts would require:

- ⦿ a fundamental move away from top down politics to a new politics of co-operation
- ⦿ a move away from the discussion of the state/market dichotomy towards the acceptance of a diverse and strong civic society as a central player in politics

- Ⓒ a realisation on the part of politicians that a new kind of approach is needed and not simply the absorption of a new technique into the existing system
- Ⓒ open ended processes which require participants to let go of control and certainty.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.