

Collective Intelligence: A way out of the crisis?

Times of crisis set forces in motion that can lead to astounding results. To which I would like to cite the following two national meetings: the National Assembly, also known as the “Anthill”, in Iceland in November 2009 and the “G1000 Summit” in Belgium in November 2011.

Once one of the richest countries in the world, Iceland plummeted to the level of an emigration-producing country in 2008’s financial crisis. Many citizens became desperate. A number of NGOs mobilised the country’s forces and in November 2009 over 1,200 people came together in the capital of Reykjavik for the National Assembly, also named the “Anthill” due to how ants organise themselves, based on the division of labour (<http://thjodfundur2009.is/english/>). The citizens wanted to take the country’s destiny into their own hands, since the country’s policies had failed. First the participants agreed on the core values for the country, with honesty and integrity paramount. They then determined the nine policy fields in which they proposed changes. Five members of government, including the finance minister, also participated. Many described the atmosphere as having a spirit of optimism.

In November last year, the people of Belgium organised a similar citizens’ summit, following Iceland’s example. A country torn apart by language, cultural and economic conflicts, also had failed to bring about a coalition government, a year and a half after the last election. Moreover the financial crisis presented the country with great challenges. If the politician’s can’t find a solution, let the citizens. The website (<http://www.g1000.org/en>) states that the aim is not to replace the politics but to offer advice. Models of the so-called “consultative democracy” have already proven themselves worldwide. The singularity of G1000 is that it was solely organised by citizens. Resulting from the G1000 Summit, a smaller one will now follow the G24 to elaborate on the discussed topics and to develop and then submit concrete suggestions on the policies.

Characterising these examples of national citizen movements are the following: a high degree of self-organisation and professionalism; preparing relevant studies in advance to ensure the population is represented; a will to generate diversity of opinion to best find a way out of the crisis and learn from one another on a global level; a reliance on participatory group work methods and appropriately trained coaches and group leaders; and offering to cooperate on policies rather than protesting and thus only minor press coverage due to a rather “soft” approach.

How politics accepts these offers of cooperation remains to be seen. But by all means, a seed for change has been placed through these national movements.

How can involving all possible opinions work out without ending in argument and chaos? Where do we end up when everyone has a say? We’d never make any decisions! Well, apparently so!

Let’s examine the criteria for success to getting results from a greater diversity of opinion:

One important precondition is the willingness to commit to the idea that the collective intelligence of all involved produces the most sustainable solutions and results and therefore all opinions are welcome. From this perspective, deviants and troublemakers

play an especially important role. In particular they point out - perhaps not always in a pleasant way - things that otherwise may be overlooked. This basic concept inevitably brings with it interpersonal values, such as respect for one another, the desire for cooperation, and equality, not only acknowledging it, but even the desire for diversity and willingness to be part of it.

The methods used to generate the collective intelligence of groups are also of great importance, as are the relevant group leaders trained within these methods. The citizens' summits in Iceland and Belgium involved such experts. Methods generating collective intelligence are for instance the Open Space Technology, Deep Democracy, Relationship Coaching etc. Put briefly, the goal is always that every voice is heard and that the group gets to know itself better as a system. With this additional knowledge, not only do we gain more understanding for one another, but for the overall system and the issues at hand. With the newly acquired skills, together we can take a new path. The further advanced knowledge alone releases the seed of change. The pleasant side effect is that through collective constructive work, we can produce a spirit of optimism – even in a crisis.

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