

Future Councils: A new institution for sustainably shaping our future

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Introduction

The insight that modern democracy, its procedures and decision-making are rather short-term guided, is not new.

When Alexis de Tocqueville travelled through the United States of America in the first half of the 19th century, he made an honest effort to understand what American democracy was and how it worked. He thought American democracy – and democracy as he came to understand it in general – hardly able to deal with long-term issues and to work steadily and effectively for long-term goals. The short time until the next elections, its influence on the behaviour of the elected politicians, the fast changing emotions of the people, the many possibilities to manipulate them and the readiness among influential members of the society to do so for particular interests - all these were and still are good reasons for serious doubt in this matter.

Because of the enormous growth of our economical, technical and organizational possibilities to change the world's outlook within a few years' time and the racing speed of the development of our societies, the issue of short-termism and ways to reform and develop our political decision-making institutionally in order to allow a sustainable, long-term shaping of our future have become more and more urgent. By now, they are crucial for our efforts to guide communities, countries and the whole world away from actual no-future paths towards sustainable, long-term pathways of development.

The Future Council Foundation, founded in 1997, has since tried to initiate the creation of future councils **to complement the work of governments and parliaments systematically and institutionally with a long-term dimension and to make it politically arguable and convincingl**. Within the last years quite a few institutions of that kind have been created – not very strong ones, but already quite tenacious. By creating the High-Level Political Forum

on Sustainable Development and by establishing global sustainable development goals, within the United Nations a kind of a World Future Council is being created these months.

Some institutions with elements of future future councils, already existing or forthcoming

Scientific Council for Government Policy, Netherlands, www.wrr.nl, since the 1970eth

Parliamentary Committee for the future, Finland, since 1993

Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Canada, since 1995

Ombudsman for future generations, Hungary since 2008 and Israel, 2001-2007

Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development, Germany, since 2009

UN-High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development together with the UN-Sustainable Development Goals, created these months / years

Future council on finance; actual motion of the small chamber of Parliament, Switzerland, not yet treated by parliament

Making the case for the long-term dimension of the next decades and sustainable goals

The main task of a future council is to reflect about the paths of development of our society that are also viable on the long-term. So the council should think about and conceive such long-term paths for

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all the fields of action that are deemed important by its members. It should imagine and elaborate long-term aims and also barriers and then formulate measures and steps that lead into its direction and could be realised from now on. It should not represent only one way of thinking, but offer space for many and different options. On this basis, a future council could provide a prospect for our society within the next twenty years, with key concepts and convincing pictures, so that it becomes possible to discuss the long-term dimension of our society in public in an interesting and precise way. Thereby we should focus on a time-frame of about twenty years, since shaping and imagining the future for a much longer period would soon become too inaccurate. Twenty years are a notion of time most of us have already experienced, and we have an idea of what and how a human society can change within this time.

Who? How to elect its members?

Who would be fit for such a task? What kind of procedure would allow us to find them? We suggest forming a team which would propose the members of the future council. On the proposing team, the Small Chamber, the National Bank, non-profit-organisations, youth-organisations, universities, churches and some other institutions would have the right to delegate one person. This proposing team would prepare a list with the candidates that should form the future council. The proposition would then have to be confirmed by the government or / and the preparing office of parliament. This way, quite a capable team could be formed. It would not be possible to elect the members for a second term, so they would not be concerned about their re-election. They would be elected for a longer period, for example of nine or twelve years. To assure continuity, the council could partly be renewed every three to four years. Further conditions could be added, such as the proportion of young and older members or of men and women.

Competences – not only a think tank

A future council needs institutionalized competences, to ensure that its work enters today's decision-drafting and decision-making in an efficient way. Such competences could be:

- Discussing its propositions in public.
- To call forth people's consultations about specific long-term subjects to promote people's understanding and opinion-

forming as well as to find out their opinion.

- The right to bring in its long-term view about issues dealt with by government and parliament in advance (decision-drafting), when those issues have a long-term impact.
- The right to make propositions of its own.
- The right to set a delay until an issue has to be dealt with by Government or Parliament, if the issue has been voted for by the people but has not been dealt with correspondingly for years.
- The right to fill in the “constitutional windows”, one window for each chapter, with its long-term aims for our society within twenty years. This window-work would fill the gap between the articles of the Constitution, often too generally formulated to ever become operative, and the laws, often resulting from daily discussions and urgent issues and therefore lacking long-term reflection. Those windows would be the basis for the discussions between members of the future council and Members of Parliament and Government. Becoming accustomed to this system, the Government and Parliament would learn more and more to take into account the long-term considerations of the future council.
- To give more power to the window-work of the future council, the council could be given the right for a qualified veto: If the discussions of the council did not lead to an agreement with Government or Parliament, the council could bring forward its veto and ask for a majority of, for example, two-thirds or three-quarters.

So, by inventing and instituting this kind of future-councils, we have to develop and enable our political democracy and its institutions in a way that they become capable to conceive and form our future in a sustainable way, to formulate long-term goals and to introduce corresponding measures effectively and in time.

Next steps

The seeds for future future councils and similar institutions have been sown. Now they have to be developed into strong and effective institutions and multiplied and spread worldwide, into communities,

regions, countries and international institutions. The Conference “Model Institutions for a Sustainable Future”, held from 24-26 April 2014 in Budapest brought together about forty protagonists from existing long-term institutions, science, politics and NGO. The participants were encouraged by a well-informed letter from the United Nations Secretary-General at the beginning of the Conference. From this basis a permanent international platform (documentation, information, instruction and advice) should be built. The forthcoming book with the same title as the Conference will be a substantial element for a common conceptual basis. Together with the UN-Offices working on this issue and with the growing network of the involved persons and institutions in different countries, the process could – and should - advance rapidly. And, additionally, long-term thinking and future-shaping should become soon part of every day's life and culture.

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