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Future Councils as Collaborative Governance Instruments

Let me take you for a short trip to the Ruhr Area, formerly the industrial heart of Germany. Here 5.2 Million people live in 53 cities that all border on one another. In this area Energy Transition – in German *Energiewende* – is a special challenge, in spite and because of major de-industrialization processes. After World War II the role of the Ruhr Area[1] was to support the reconstruction of Germany on the basis of coal mining and steel production. Due to major de-industrialization processes energy consumption and emissions in the Ruhr Area have decreased massively, but this was accompanied by massive socio-economical changes e.g. numerous job losses resulting in high unemployment rates, high municipal debts as well as image and identity struggles. Nevertheless until today the Ruhr Area is one of Europe´s biggest and most central industry and energy regions and therefore a central playing field for the *Energiewende.*

Generally the German *Energiewende* is framed in the context of climate protection and nuclear phase-out, and talked about in abstract numbers: The German federal government committed to a reduction of 40% CO_2 emissions till 2020 compared to 1990, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia[1] committed to a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions of 25%. The core of the German *Energiewende* is to shift away from energy production based on fossil and nuclear power sources towards the sustainable production of energy as well as an increase in energy efficiency. These are the central pillars of the *Energiewende* as it is described by different levels of government and administration.

However the *Energiewende* cannot be reduced to a socio-technological project, it rather can be described as multitude of highly complex transformations in diverse areas exceeding energy production and including mobility, food production, housing, or in short: the ways we live (Beck, 2013, p. 2; Wissenschaftlicher Beirat Globale Umweltveränderungen, 2011, pp. 6, 13, 58, 101ff; Kopatz, 2013, pp. 159ff). This means that the *Energiewende* is a challenge for the whole of society, since political institutions and established planning processes are not sufficiently able to govern such complexities (Beck, 2013, p. 3; Ethikkommission "Sichere Energieversorgung", 2011, p. 9).

On the background that for example the *Commission for Energy Safety* (2011, p. 9) describes it as central factor to design the *Energiewende* as a *composite work* ("Gemeinschaftswerk") of diverse actors, we designed and experimented with an instrument that should contribute to organize the *Energiewende* in the Ruhr Area as such. We named this instrument *Future Council*. Our special focus thereby laid on the creation of exchange between informal sustainability networks and formal politics and bureaucracy. "We" in this context stands for a group of researchers working in the project *Energy Transition in the Ruhr Area* at the *Institute of Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen*.

In this paper I will introduce to you the general idea of *Future Councils*, give you some insides into the *Future Council* we organized in September 2015 and air the idea of *Future Council´s* potential to re-design cities as commons.
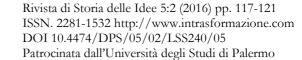
1. What is a Future Council

What is a *Future Council*? Or I should actually ask: what is our idea of *Future Councils*? , since the term "future council" is used in diverse contexts (see for example Leggewie and Nanz, 2016). This mentioned I will solely focus on the term *Future Council* that is linked to the political experiment we did in September 2015. I will not engage in other notions of Future Councils.

The basic idea of our *Future Council* is to create a place in the present where actors from different groups that are already engaged in sustainability, discuss and define sustainable futures, and how to get there in a collaborative manner.

During our research about civic engagement in the context of the *Energiewende* in the Ruhr Area, we realized awareness and communication deficits between different actor groups working

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[1] The Ruhr Area is a region located in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

towards a more sustainable Ruhr Area; especially between civil society actors on the one hand, and local politicians and administration on the other. The importance of individual actors for sustainable transformations is underlined by different research findings (Grin et al., 2010; Leggewie and Welzer, 2009; Leggewie, 2013; Kristof, 2010; Sommer and Schad, 2011). This led to the conclusion that more communicative, cooperative, and collaborative[2] relations between civically engaged actors and actors from other groups working on sustainability bear a high potential to make transformations happen.[3]

Against this background the idea was to experimentally try out an instrument that would raise the awareness and appreciation of different actors working towards a more sustainable Ruhr Area for each other, for example between the head of a local environmental committee and a member of a group working on Aquaponik – a circular system for food production. The goal was to allow participants to collaboratively find and work on solutions for existing problems (general and project related), based on own experiences, enabling the exchange of good- practice between participants, since they all possess substantial knowledge and competencies. A special focus lays on increasing the visibility of existing innovative solutions of civil society actors. In connection to this the idea was also that new projects and practical collaboration, for example between an Alevi Community and a network for Education for Sustainable Development, may occur. In order not to overburden the already highly active participants this was not the core focus of the *Future Council* though. The *Future Council* was further designed as supplement to existing mainly consultative forms of participation. Instead of participants working out suggestions to hand them over to another actor group the idea was to mainly gain an impact directly through the participants.[4]

1. Future Council 1.0 - a political experiment

In September 2015 we put these ideas of *Future Councils* into action. We invited 18 people from different places in the Ruhr Area to be part of our *Future Council* – five local politicians, five members of local administrations and eight actors that stand out because of their civic engagement. Our invitation criteria were not social representation, but heterogeneity of actors groups, cities of origin in the Ruhr Area (e.g. bigger or smaller cities, south or north in the Ruhr Area), and field of activity. Participants came together for one and a half days to collaboratively work on the question: "How to design a sustainable Ruhr Area together?" The moderation was conducted by a team of two external professional moderators. We, a team of four researchers, were the inviting-hosts of this political experiment, but we did not act as participants; we took part as observers.

Looking back, many aspects of the *Future Council* did not work out as expected; in fact there are quite a few things we would change in the way we designed and conducted it. We would for example change the role we as researchers had, from a strictly observing position to a more active and moderating one. We would change the dramaturgy in different points and alter some of the methods we used or the way we used them.
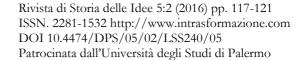
A central difficulty, it turned out, is to bring together the habit of classifications along thematic aspects such as mobility, food production, energy etc. and fast output orientation with the idea of a participative format that focuses not on a certain and acute problem or assignment, such as where to place wind wheels, but on exchange, discussion and co-definition. In our view this broad thematic scope and the fact that the *Future Council* was not linked to a specific decision

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[2] In context of this paper and without engaging in further definition we differentiate between cooperation and collaboration, based on the criteria of hierarchy and division of labor. Whereas these aspects are found in cooperation, collaboration is marked by more equality and togetherness.

[3] Based on another track of our research project we can also underline for the Ruhr Area that there exist many civically engaged actors which have a wide range of ideas and are engaged to make sustainable transformations happen.

[4] The *Future Council* we conducted was a one-time event and not linked or synchronized to political processes or institutions. Ideally *Future Councils* are a communicative format that permanently accompanies existing political processes.

process is what actually allows and enables an entanglement of perspectives, mutual understanding and learning, as well as co-definition. Discussions between participants like the artist who initiated a worldwide network constructed around plant-color production and the local politician with a focus on electricity will not lead to miraculous solutions. But discussions between these actors who are both focal for sustainable transformations of the Ruhr Area and who have important knowledge, skills and experiences may lead to increased mutual understanding and learning, to an entanglement of perspectives, new insights and ideas (Schaal and Heidenreich, 2006, p. 208). Especially in the long run these are highly valuable achievements, since a transformation towards more sustainability in the Ruhr Area cannot be achieved one sided through top-down or bottom-up processes, or through transformations in isolated sectors alone.

Therefore we are convinced that *Future Councils* can be an effective instrument contributing to make the Ruhr Area more sustainable, especially because of its main feature: bringing together actors from different groups working in vastly different ways towards more sustainability.

Our interpretation and evaluation suggest that this first experimental try-out of a *Future Council* was successful in fueling collaboration by creating new contacts and networks. It challenged the perspectives of participants what *Energiewende* encompasses, who relevant actors are and what forms the practices that contribute to a more sustainable Ruhr Area may take. Participants got a new view on the relevance of their own work and its connection to Energy Transition. And the *Future Council* also empowered participants by illustrating potential alliances. We also got positive feedback about the ideas *Future Council*s are based on by participants from all actor groups, who articulated the need for an instrument such as *Future Council*s for the Ruhr Area.

Every instrument needs to be applied to have an effect though and as researchers we only had the possibility to conduct a *Future Council* once during our project which ends in 2016. Therefore in November 2015 we launched an event to discuss and spread the idea of *Future Council*s with politicians, actors from administration and foundations, as well as other researchers.

In this context I would like to point out to you how *Future Councils* can contribute not only to re-design the Ruhr Area in a more sustainable way (for more information about this, see Schmitt et al. 2016), but how *Future Councils*, as collaborative governance instrument, can contribute to re-design cities as commons.

How can Future Councils contribute to re-design cities as Commons?

Re-designing cities as commons is a highly complex process, just as sustainable transformations in the Ruhr Area are that were at the heart of the *Future Council* 1.0. Organizing or even institutionalizing a *Future Council* will not lead to a fast miraculous transformation in any way. Nevertheless *Future Councils* have the potential for long time contribution for redesigning cities as commons. The question in need of answering now is: How?

Actually answering this question poses some others first: What does it mean "city as commons"? How to envision this? What does it mean to re-design cities as commons? I will not engage into these questions, instead I suggest posing it to others in the setting of *Future Councils*. Therefore I suggest inviting actors from different backgrounds already open or connected to commons in a very broad sense, bringing together people that work in garden project with people from hacker or maker backgrounds, but also people that do not see themselves as commoners yet (Euler, 2016, p. 16; Helfrich et al., 2015).

Not only am I highly curious what the answers would be, but I argue that collaboratively working on these question can be a starting point for re-designing cities as commons in a broad sense. As I laid out before complex transformations are hardly to be accomplished through one-sided or isolated actions (Beck, 2013; Leggewie, 2010; Welzer, 2011), which implies the necessity of joint and collaborative efforts to make sustainability transformations happen.[5] Co-defining and co-producing transformations, does not only seem important for transformations processes towards sustainability, but even more so for commons due to the significance of self-organization

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[5] For a general discussion about the potential of participation and collaboration for sustainable transformation see Newig (2011).

for commons. Ostrom (1999) points to this in her famous design principles.

At the same time *Future Councils* can also be a starting point for concrete smaller commons- steps, since it can be an incubator for new contacts, networks, and projects. Also it was an explicit goal of the *Future Councils 1.0* not to overburden participants with new projects, at least three actors engaged in another actor's network project including concrete actions like joint workshops.

A Future Council cannot only be a starting point for general processes and concrete projects, but also a practice ground for commoning as a social practice in need of continuous training (Acksel et al., 2015, p. 134). Collaboratively working on issues bears certain challenges, especially with actors from different backgrounds and in a case where questions are not complying with existing structural habits. *Future Councils* can be a practice ground for being aware of, able to communicate with, and appreciating one another and creating common ground along the way. During the *Future Council* 1.0 we can state that differing viewpoints, concepts and communication habits posed major challenges. At the same time we were able to observe how participants not necessarily overcame these differences but worked with them, also this sometimes was challenging and exhausting.

Future Councils are in no way a universal remedy, but as I argued in this very short thought experiment can be an instrument that can contribute to re-design cities as commons, forming a starting point for collaborative re-design and a practice ground for commoning.

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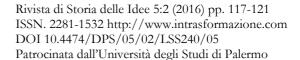
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