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Portrait of A Pioneer (English Version)

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PORTRAIT OF A PIONEER -

Prof. Peter Dienel: Still a Pathfinder at 82

Interviewed by Antoine Vergne, Freie Universität Berlin



"I want to show you something" says professor Peter Dienel, as he pulls a sheet of paper out of his jacket. It reads: "If you want to lead a happy life, connect it with a goal." Albert Einstein.

"You see?" continues Peter, "Albert Einstein was right". Two hours with Peter Dienel and this sentence was becoming all too real. At 82, Dienel seems happy and balanced and is still pursuing his goal: seeing the Planning Cell (PC) he invented become a commonly used policy-making tool in Germany, Europe and the world.

Dr. Dienel developed the planning cell during the 1970's when he was a member of the planning staff of the state chancellery, North-Rhine/Westphalia. During his tenure he was shocked by the short-sightedness of the political and bureaucratic decision-making processes: they kept concentrating on near-term problems instead of focusing on more urgent and serious long-term problems. In order to address this deficit in vision, Dienel worked out the concept of the PC.

The PC is an instrument for participative democracy and allows ordinary citizens to participate in governing. It aims at insulating political decision-making processes from private interests and attempts to foster competent and common-interest oriented decisions. The model developed by Dienel is ingenious at accomplishing this.

He defines it as „a group of 25 randomly selected informed citizens who work out a solution for a complex problem. They are helped by 2 process-facilitators, paid and exempted from their daily-obligations during the four days of the process”.



The Nine Elements of the PC

There are nine elements that comprise a PC. The first is “teamwork” (group work). During the four days of the PC the citizens are continuously working in little groups in which composition rotates. This “obligation” to co-operate with everyone allows the emergence of a strong group dynamic and generates high creativity. As a consequence, no persistent and dominating opinion-leading behavior can appear.

The second characteristic is their defined “role”. The participants are told to act as experts (they make the decisions) but they must remember that they are primarily citizens of their state. They inform themselves while trying to remain objective, put emphasis on cooperation and must identify themselves with what they believe to be in general public interest. After due deliberation, they draft a “citizen report” in which the results of their work are presented.

Third, there is the compensation. It is closely linked with the previous one and differentiates the planning cell from most of other participative procedures. The citizens are paid for their activity. Therefore they know they and their work are to be taken seriously and that their public deliberation matters. This puts their efforts on a equal footing to that of politicians and experts, who usually make the decisions. In addition, this stipend helps attract the kinds of citizens who are normally not politically active.

The fourth basic element of the PC is to assist the citizen participants satisfy their daily work, family and personal obligations so that they can take these „political vacations“ (Peter Dienel). For persons, who have to look after children or older relatives, a support is organized for the duration of the PC.

The fifth characteristic of Dienel's concept is the temporal delimitation of the meeting to four days. This framework secures the neutrality of the participants who do not have time to develop any group interest. It also helps the rotation principle -since it increases the number of PCs to be used and therefore increases each citizen's opportunity to participate personally in a PC. To Dienel: “everyone is governed and governs“...and the more chances to participate directly, the better.

The sixth attribute of the planning cell is the selection method. Dienel decided as early as 1970 to use random sampling. This procedure was according to him the „most reasonable“. It contrasts with procedures like voting or any form of voluntary participation or "self selection" because it avoids the intrusion and/or dominance of private or organized interests in the decision making process. In addition, random selection guarantees a high level of genuine representativeness. It also opens participation to people from very different social and economic positions, people who ordinarily are systematically excluded or who shy away from political activity. Last but not least random selection is a cornerstone of the democratic principle of equality.

The seventh aspect of the PC is that common sense will prevail. The citizen experts are not selected for their authority in a particular field. This implies that each

citizen is competent for solving the stated problems and for “planning his environment himself“. The common sense of common people will determine the public interest.

To achieve this task, the citizens receive support from two assets. One resource is the experts and the other is the process-facilitators. The latter are responsible for the organization of the practical aspects of the PC. They provide the necessary office space, plan the schedule and edit the citizen report. The experts, after having presented their expertise and opinion as representatives of special interests, remain available for further inquiries from the citizens.

The ninth and last characteristic of a planning cell is that the citizens answer a predetermined problem. They cannot select the topic on which they are going to work unless, of course, a PC is used previously to set the agenda for the decision making PC.

Overcoming Obstacles and Producing Successes

These nine elements, which form the PC, prove – after 30 years of practice- to be very efficient. However, as the first projects were organized, many obstacles arose. „During the test phase we had, for example, problems with the organization of the daily program“ says Dienel. „The idea of small working group with five people emerged only later“. But, „our procedure is now well regulated and standardized“.

Another example involves sponsorship. Professor Dienel resists until today the great temptation to work for any industry as the sponsor for a PC: „At the beginning I had several opportunities to organize PCs for large industries. I always rejected them because I think that the economy is already dominant enough in our systems“. The consequence is that the pioneer of the planning cell works exclusively with public authorities. This attitude shows that Peter Dienel's approach is just as relevant today in a larger worldwide context. As he says: "Pure representative democracy is no longer functional. Simple and inexpensive solutions must be substituted. One of them is called the planning cell. It is a basis for true representative democracy at all levels of government everywhere and it has proved many of my hypotheses to be accurate."

Dienel cannot think of any regrettable moments. He was „convinced by the rightness of the project“ from the start and remains that way today...”I was enamored of the idea of the planning cell immediately and I wanted to push it“. Professor Dienel was at least 20 years ahead of his time and he continues to "push" the idea and the practice of it to this very day even though this time-tested tool of citizen participation is still regarded as an unorthodox procedure....despite its successes.

So what are these successes?

Since 1978 more than 300 planning cells have been organized, in which more than 8000 randomly selected citizens participated. This high number of citizen consultation makes possible a series of empirical findings, which Dienel had already

foreseen in his book „The Planning Cell“ (published 1978). These findings refer not only to the citizens but also to their effects on the political system as a whole.

It has become absolutely clear that the PC allows participants to play their role as citizen-experts. This function is nowadays exerted exclusively by professional politicians. As Dienel says : “with the planning cell democracy sparkles again” by empowering citizens in new ways. They see that they can exert an influence on policy making and want to participate more. "I receive letters and calls from people, which formed citizen groups,” comments Dienel. “They flourish“.

In Hanover in 1996 a set of planning cells (300 random citizens) was organized with the task of renewing the public suburban traffic network of the city. After this consultation 80 of the participants created a citizens initiative to compel the implementation of their decisions. This effect of the PC participation shows that human beings are not intrinsically passive but that they are kept passive by the existing representative system. The PCs get citizens to realize they can overcome this by going around their representatives and bureaucrats.

Another effect of participation in the PC is that participants begin to recognize that citizens are quite capable of determining what the common good is. They can achieve this by working in small diverse groups and by meeting and interacting with representatives of other social classes. Together they must discover the common interest, which goes beyond their own personal interests. PCs show them how this is possible.

If one leaves the micro level, one can state that the PC also affects the social system as a whole. The random selection of participants allows, better than every other form of participation, a realistic representation of the entire population. This is illustrated by a concrete example: a series of planning cells was organized in 2001 in Bavaria with 425 participants to deal with the issue of consumer protection. From this sample, 55% were women. That corresponded almost exactly to the population distribution of Bavaria, which consists of 52% women. Yet in the elected state legislature, only 26% delegates are women. In the federal legislature this rate drops to 20%. Random selection, then, creates a far more representative democratic decision-making group than does the system of election.

Another finding of Peter Dienel's many experiments with PCs is that under certain conditions, using PCs solves actual political problems much better than the representative political system does. A good example of this came recently in the Basque section of Spain where the official planning and construction of one section of a highway called „Leizaran“ had prompted a number of violent protests from those who lived in its pathway. So, PCs were employed in the planning of another section called "Urbina Maltzaga". The priority for the planning of this motorway was to prevent the same fiasco as the one which occurred during the construction of the “Leizaran”. The section „Urbina Maltzaga“ was instead discussed by 350 randomly selected citizens from cities and districts of the region. The suggestions of these planning cells (NIP = Nucleos de Intervencion Participativa) were accepted by the population, executed by the government

and realized without problems. As Dienel sees it, "The massive use [of the model] will let a completely new political culture arise".



How Dienel Sees Himself and His Work

Dienel is also convincing when he admits: „I spent a lot of time on this project. My children did not see their father at all“. His life's work was and is about the planning cell, which he developed at the expense of his private life. When I asked whether he sees himself as a pioneer of participative democracy, he answers: "I don't care. What is important to me, is that people discover and use this model. It is a good one". But as good as it appears, Dienel understands his critics.

One of the major criticisms that he has heard a lot is that PCs cost too much. In today's money a PC costs up to 30,000 Euros. That means that a project with four planning cells costs up to 120.000 €, eight PCs can climb to 240.000 €. Dienel does not think too much of this argument.

After all, these costs must be compared with those of traditional decision-making processes. A little "computation" puts the cost problem in a better perspective: In the year 2002 the French parliament cost 741 million Euro (461 million € for the "house of representative" and 280 million € for the senate). In this period the French parliament adopted 122 laws. With 741 million €, 24,700 planning cells could be organized and thus 24,700 public interest-oriented decisions adopted. That seems like a pretty fair trade off.

The small percentage of citizen participants is also criticized. While it is true that only a few random selected people can participate in this new citizen-based decision-making process, how many participate meaningfully in the legislative process? Also, in the preparatory phase of a PC project all representatives of the relevant organized interest are invited (associations; parties; NGO's; experts; interested citizens). They have the possibility to bring in their points of view and can later participate as experts during the PC.

No matter how successful the PCs have been, the criticisms remain. This is largely due to the fact that those in power in representative democracies really do not want to share power with the people through such new processes as the PC and they have close associates in the media, in government and in Academe. So they repeat their criticisms of Dienel's Planning Cells over and over again even though they are full of holes.

Dr. Peter Dienel, however, believes in its future and is hardly interested in its past: „I attached no importance to self documentation. I think of tomorrow: when thousands of planning cells per year will take place and millions of human beings will participate in them“. So, the biggest obstacle to faster growth in the use of the PC seems to be inertia, being stuck in the status quo. But Dr. Dienel is neither inert nor stuck.

After my discussion with professor Dienel the question whether the Dienelian utopia is realizable is met with a clear answer: „If it's possible? Sure, why not? Democracy is a very daring attempt, and what we must do is to add our piece to democracy". The Planning Cell has been a large piece, in fact. And the question of who will keep it going after he is gone is for the 82 year Dienel not an issue: "I did not have the time to look for a successor". But he has no fear: "Someone will take my place. Maybe you?"

I wonder. He has opened so many doors. Is there one for me?

Berlin, 21st of September 2005.