

## **Chapter 5**

# **The Power of Visioning: The Contribution of Future Search Conferences to Decision-Making in Local Agenda 21 Processes**

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## **5.1 Introduction**

The Future Search Conference is one of the most innovative methods for stakeholder involvement employed in Local Agenda 21 processes. This chapter seeks to evaluate the contribution of the Future Search Conference method to enhancing the quality of local decision-making in the context of Local Agenda 21. The chapter provides empirical evidence from a German and an English case study and reviews it from the normative perspective of collaborative planning theory. It concludes by proposing guidance for the successful employment of the Future Search Conference method.

## **5.2 The Future Search Conference Method**

### **5.2.1 *A New Generation of Systemic Participation Methods on the Rise***

A new generation of methods for participation in decision-making processes evolved in the 1990s (Levett, 1997; New Economics Foundation, 1998; Wilcox, 1994). These new methods seek and process information on the basis of systems thinking, require broad stakeholder involvement, utilise principles of self-organisation and are vision-centred (Senge, 1998; Wheatley, 1992). Examples of these new large group methods are Open Space Technology, Future Search Conference, Search Conference and Real Time Strategic Change (Bunker & Alban, 1997). These new participation methods can be traced back to three intellectual traditions: Kurt Lewin's social psychology, Wilfried Bion's psychoanalytic theory and Ludwig von

Bertalanffy's systems theory as applied to organisations (Bunker & Alban: 11). They became fashionable at a time when increasing global interdependence (often coined globalisation) forced organisations and communities to become more responsive to changes in their organisational environment by employing a whole systems perspective in their planning processes (Innes, 1996). The Future Search Conference is a prototype of these new methods.

### ***5.2.2 Origin, Principles and Basic Assumptions***

The Future Search Conference method was developed by the American Marvin Weisbord and first published in 1987 (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995, 1996). The development of the method was inspired by Eva Schindler-Rainman's and Ronald Lippitt's large-scale community futures conferences in North America in the 1970s and by Eric Trist's and Fred Emery's Search Conference model, first used in 1960.

The aim of a Future Search Conference is to bring together a broad spectrum of local stakeholders in a 3-day collaborative process in order to create a shared vision for the future of a community or organisation. The 64 participants are carefully chosen by an appointed or self-selected steering group to represent those who will be affected by the outcomes, those who have unusual perspectives on the issue to contribute and those who have the decision-making power to implement the agreed visions. The seating arrangement features eight round tables spread out throughout the conference room. Due to the large group size, most of the work in a Future Search Conference is carried out in small groups of eight that report their results to a plenary session. The small group work alternates between homogenous stakeholder groups and mixed groups.

The format of the Future Search Conference is a fixed schedule of predetermined exercises, all carefully engineered to create commitment and a cooperative setting. The choreography of the Future Search Conference moves from the past through the present into the future before it returns to the here and now in order to formulate action plans and strategies. A dialogue process leading to a consensus is at the heart of the process while conflicts are explicitly left unaddressed. What makes the Future Search Conference interesting given our interest in quality of decision-making, is that participants are regarded as experts in their own right and are encouraged to use the full range of ways of knowing – including anecdotal knowledge (for a detailed description and critical discussion of the Future Search design see Oels, 2002).

### ***5.2.3 Expected Results***

According to the developers of the Future Search Conference (Weisbord & Janoff, 1996: 73), the method delivers results in a number of areas. First of all, a Future Search Conference offers an opportunity for the individual to discover their own resourcefulness and to take back responsibility for themselves. Bridging the cultural

gap between the various stakeholder groups and legitimating their differences as a fact of life to be lived with is supposedly a second major achievement of the conference. Third, the conference is supposed to allow participants to learn from and with each other. Finally, new networks and new projects are expected to form which will last beyond the conference itself. Weisbord and Janoff emphasise that they expect 'faster implementation of action plans' when the principles of the Future Search Conference are adhered to than if not (Weisbord & Janoff: 83).

### **5.3 Future Search as a Tool for Stakeholder Involvement for Local Agenda 21**

The trend towards stakeholder involvement at the local level has been significantly strengthened by Local Agenda 21, one of the outcomes of the Rio Earth Summit.

In the early 1970s, the supposedly superior development model of the industrialised countries with its emphasis on economic growth was confronted with 'limits to growth' (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972). Development seemed to be running up against limits in time (durability of development with regards to future generations) and limits in space (distribution of development amongst present generations). Also, the nature of economic growth itself became the focus of the debate, with some claiming that qualitative but not quantitative growth could be sustained. Over the course of 2 decades, the concept of sustainable development became crafted as a solution to the limits to growth. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio 1992, the concept of sustainable development was translated into a 40-chapter programme of action called Agenda 21. Sustainable development has a procedural and a substantial component. The substantial component of sustainable development implies a development path that equally considers social, ecological and economic requirements. The procedural component of sustainable development prescribes the involvement of all stakeholders in a dialogue or cooperative process with the aim of achieving a consensus on a local interpretation of sustainable development. One of the major assumptions of Agenda 21 is that win-win solutions can be easily found when all stakeholders are brought around the table.

Of particular interest for this chapter is Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, which suggests that local authorities should produce a local version of Agenda 21, in which they interpret the implications of sustainable development for their locality. This is to be done in "a consultative process with their local populations" leading to a "consensus on a 'Local Agenda 21' for the community" (UN, 1992, Agenda 21, Chapter 28). It is quite clear that the transition to sustainable development requires new methods for stakeholder involvement at the local level. Therefore, Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 has provided strong new impetus for local experiments with public participation in decision-making (for a more detailed review of the impact of Local Agenda 21 in Britain and Germany see O'Riordan & Voisey, 1998).

Despite the fact that it was never invented for this reason, the Future Search Conference method seems ideally suited to facilitate the involvement of diverse

stakeholders in a Local Agenda 21 process. The Future Search emphasis on stakeholder selection supports Local Agenda 21 organisers in choosing the 'right' mix of people. The main outcome of a Local Agenda 21 process is supposed to be a consensus on a vision and related action plans – just like the outcome of a Future Search Conference. However, there are also two inbuilt problems with using the Future Search method for the purposes of Local Agenda 21. First, the exclusive mode of inviting conference participants is at odds with the aim of Local Agenda 21 to involve as many citizens as possible in direct interaction. Secondly, the Future Search method with its rejection of expert inputs offers no mechanism to ensure that the outcomes are in line with the ecological (or social/economic) requirements of sustainable development.

## **5.4 The Normative Ideal of 'Collaborative Planning' as Measuring Stick for the Evaluation**

### ***5.4.1 The Research Question and Methodology***

The data collection was guided by a research interest in the impact of a Future Search Conference on the participants, on local political decision-making and on the local community in a wider sense. A careful analysis of the factors that influenced the impact of a Future Search Conference (or lack thereof) led to a critical discussion of institutional arrangements which support or hinder effective decision-making.

The research presented in this chapter was guided by the rationale of the exploratory case study method (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994) and based upon the principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The following analysis draws on interviews, focus groups and document research carried out during two periods of field work (a total of 3 months each) in Olching and Rushmoor from 1997 to 1998. Moreover, the findings were updated on the basis of telephone interviews carried out in February 2000. The data was originally gathered in the context of a stakeholder based evaluation of each Future Search conference over a period of 2 years (Oels, 2000).

### ***5.4.2 Collaborative Planning as Evaluation Framework***

The evaluation of innovative participatory processes is a topic that is still in its infancy (Chess, 2000: 769; Oppermann & Langer, 2002: 76; Rowe & Frewer, 2000: 3). Systematic, long-term evaluation studies of stakeholder dialogues are still the exception (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Helling, 1998; Joss, 1995; Kuper, 1997; Oels, 2003; Polanyi, 2002; Street, 1997). The existing evaluation studies vary widely with regards to their purpose, focus, scope and disciplinary perspective. While the methodological and theoretical issues of evaluating participatory processes have been discussed at length (for example Chess, 2000; Oels, 2006), no set of commonly used indicators for the evaluation has emerged yet. Criteria for theory-based evaluations have been taken from critical theory (Webler, 1995), collaborative planning (Healey, 1997),

risk communication (Durant, 1995; Rossi, 1997; Rowe & Frewer, 2000), public participation (Fiorino, 1990; Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Webler, 1995) and democratic theory (Barber, 1984; Blaug, 1996; Fiorino, 1990). When selecting a set of criteria, my aim was to choose one that resonates in many ways with the values implied in the Future Search Conference design.

On the basis of this criterion, collaborative planning theory (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997; Selle, 1996; Tewdwr-Jones & Thomas, 1998) was chosen as a measuring stick for the evaluation. Collaborative planning theory upholds the citizens' capacity for learning and genuine public thinking.

The argument for increased and higher quality participation as put forward by collaborative planning theory rests on two pillars: one is a rejection of the privileged role of experts in favour of civic science, the second is a rejection of the notion of a consumer with fixed preferences in favour of the learning citizen. Healey bases collaborative planning firmly in a post-positivist understanding of science, where all knowledge is seen as socially constructed an inherently value-based (Healey, 1997: 29–30). The knowledge provided by experts is no longer regarded automatically superior to other ways of knowing (Fischer, 1993: 183). Theories of collaborative planning strongly adhere to the view that people's very consciousnesses and preferences are formed in social interactions with others and are subject to constant review in the light of new experiences (Healey). In this process of constant social learning, self-interests can be modified to accommodate public interests. According to collaborative planning theory, a decision can only be as legitimate as the process that willed it into being. Table 5.1 lists the process criteria that characterise a deliberative

**Table 5.1** The essence of collaborative planning theory (Oels, 2003)

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**Collaborative planning theory**

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**Process criteria**

**Fairness**

- Diversity of stakeholders present
- Constructive dialogue
- Fair process

**Competence**

- Participants are experts on their affairs
- Allowing multiple ways of making validity claims
- Using all relevant information
- Systems thinking

**Outcome criteria**

A consensus followed by action

**Capacity building criteria**

New contacts and partnerships

**Learning**

- Transcending egoistic preferences towards the common good
- Scope for innovation
- Learning amongst the participants

**Trust**

- Building trust
  - Reviving local democracy
  - Regenerating community spirit
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process carried out according to collaborative planning theory, the expected outcomes and the resulting capacity building. This list will serve as a measuring stick for the evaluation of two empirical cases where the Future Search Conference was employed.

## **5.5 The Future Search Conference Method in Practice**

This section will present empirical evidence gathered in two case study areas and evaluate it in the context of collaborative planning theory. The first section introduces the two case study areas, the second section presents the empirical findings for each of the evaluation criteria proposed by collaborative planning theory above.

### ***5.5.1 Introducing the Case Study Areas***

Given the lack of systematic evaluations of Future Search Conferences, it seemed most appropriate to follow the rationale of the exploratory case study method and to study two cases in great depth (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994). The two cases were selected for investigation because they were the only ones in Britain and Germany in 1997 known of where a Future Search Conference was employed for the purpose of a Local Agenda 21 process.

Gemeinde Olching is a German commuter region on the verge of a town West of the Bavarian capital Munich. The formerly rural area with its three former villages Olching, Esting and Geiselbullach has experienced exponential growth in housing construction and population size since the construction of a fast train connection to downtown Munich in 1972. The area now houses 21,000 people. Olching's Local Agenda 21 process was initiated by the local adult education institute which conducted a 'special programme' of seminars on Agenda 21 from 1996 onwards, featuring the Mayor as patron. The Future Search Conference was organised by local volunteers to launch the Local Agenda 21 process in a bottom-up manner with minor financial support by the Mayor.

Rushmoor is an English commuter area 30 miles West of London, consisting of the two towns Aldershot and Farnborough with a population of 86,000. Rushmoor's high dependence on the military has made it economically vulnerable in times of frequent Defence Reviews and budget cuts. It could be argued that a vision for the civic transformation of the area was needed and a Future Search Conference could be considered a proactive response to this challenge. It was the Chief Executive of Rushmoor Borough Council himself who initiated Rushmoor's Local Agenda 21 process by creating the post of a LA 21 officer and by supporting the officer's plan to conduct a Future Search Conference.

### 5.5.2 Process Criteria

The following presentation of empirical evidence gathered in the two case study areas will be structured along the criteria proposed by collaborative planning theory as introduced above.

#### 5.5.2.1 Fairness

The Future Search Conference method aims to bring a diverse range of 64 stakeholders into the conference room. Participant recruitment to the Future Search Conference was the task of an appointed steering group in both case study areas. Each steering group consisted of 8–15 highly influential members, each of whom represented one of the major stakeholder groups of the community. The steering group carefully selected participants from a range of those affected by the outcomes, those with information on the local key issues and those with resources to facilitate action. There was no process by which a sector could nominate their own candidates or by which those who felt they would be affected by the outcomes were given a right to participate. Limiting the number of participants to 64 and selecting participants in a top-down manner implies that access to the Future Search Conference is always highly restricted (boundary rules).

In practice both Future Search Conferences gathered a local elite of committed people, but failed to attract a cross-section of ‘ordinary’ citizens. This bias is implied in the Future Search guidance which emphasises the importance of getting the local movers and shakers into the conference room – in addition to the citizens. In one of the case studies, the business sector and young people were under-represented at the conference. This weakened the status of the conference outcomes in both case studies and made it easy for politicians to dismiss them as the views of one particular fraction of the local community. Still, the conference participants were from a wide enough range of sectors to facilitate a widening of horizons amongst conference participants.

Fairness has been interpreted by Webler (1995) as the equal opportunity of all conference participants to shape the agenda, select the rules and the facilitator, look after rule enforcement and to discuss. The decision to launch the Local Agenda 21 process by hosting a Future Search Conference was taken by the initial group of Local Agenda 21 activists in Olching and by the Local Agenda 21 officer in Rushmoor and supported by the steering group after some further discussion of advantages and disadvantages. The selection of the conference participants is a key concern with regards to fairness. As discussed above, the exclusive mode of participant selection was criticised as unfair especially by those not invited to the conference. In Olching, the fact that only 5 out of 30 councillors were invited, led to open hostility of the majority of councillors towards the Future Search Conference project: *“I believe that*

*before the conference, many people were upset because they had not been invited to the Future Search Conference, apparently because they are not important. And every councillor believes of himself that he is important in the community. And if he isn't included, something must be seriously wrong"* (councillor, Olching).

The overall title or topic of a Future Search Conference is determined by the steering group. The agenda for a Future Search Conference is fixed by the guidance available on the method, which urges facilitators not to compromise the recommended step-by-step proceedings and allocated timings in any way (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995). Participants are expected to follow the instructions of the facilitators in an unquestioning way, often without understanding the overall purpose of a conference task. This has made a number of conference participants feel as if they were subjected to a large *"social experiment"*. Also, the procedure prescribed for the identification of the common ground (aggregation rule) was regarded as unfair by a majority of conference participants, as key issues were filed away as 'unresolved differences' without further discussion.

It is only within the framework of each conference exercise that participants are free to identify their own priorities and issues of their choice. In the small groups, all are equally charged with selecting a facilitator, a note-keeper, a time-keeper and a person to report back to the large group, and to swap these roles around for each new task given to them. All participants have an equal opportunity to contribute to the conference deliberations in theory. In my two case study conferences participants complained that the articulate and those with professional experience in discussing political issues dominated. One focus group in the Rushmoor case study complained that especially councillors had dominated the small group work because they always seemed to *"feel a need to say something"* because *"otherwise they wouldn't be a councillor"*.

A key principle of the Future Search Conference is that each person's point of view is regarded as equally valid. All energies are directed towards the common ground, namely that which the participants can agree upon without ever going into value disputes. Both investigated Future Search Conferences established an over all collaborative mode of deliberation which struck conference participants as exactly the opposite of the adversarial rituals of party politics. Participants at both conferences showed themselves impressed by the level of responsibility and commitment displayed by their fellow participants. They reported that they had treated each other with a previously unknown amount of respect.

*"A behaviour of showing off, which some people seem to have as a habit, that was missing, everyone contributed on a factual level"* (male, statutory sector).

*"You treat each other very carefully, none of the typical I hit you and you hit back, but instead playfulness, allowing others to speak up, allowing opposing viewpoints to be aired"* (councillor).

Some participants claimed however that the constructive conference atmosphere had only been possible because the conference was not threatening to anyone's interests. The conference method was supposed to have ensured that no decisions were taken that 'hurt' any particular stakeholder group. As one participant remarked: *"It is easy to agree as long as it doesn't cost anything."*



### 5.5.2.2 Competence

In this section I will discuss to what extent the two investigated Future Search Conferences lived up to collaborative planning theories' objective of competence. Competence according to the developers of the Future Search Conference is anchored in the selection of the conference participants and in treating them as experts in their own right – in their capacity as local residents, parents, charity activists, businessmen or Council members. By bringing together a carefully selected spectrum of stakeholders to an issue, the Future Search Conference aims to bring the relevant information on the topic under discussion into the room and to make it available to all stakeholder groups as a basis for decision-making and action planning (information rule). Half of the conference is spent building a shared pool of local expertise from a systems perspective, visualised on posters in the room. Participants reported that they had learned a lot from each other over the course of the Future Search Conference. Educational inputs during the conference days are strongly discouraged as participants would feel less inclined to draw on their own resourcefulness.

The Future Search Conference method successfully encourages participants to draw on multiple ways of making validity claims, thereby refusing to give scientific knowledge claims any air of superiority. Future Search facilitators are supposed to encourage participants to back any argument they make with anecdotal evidence or real-life examples. Overall, this worked well at both observed conferences. Future Search Conference facilitators are supposed to establish the legitimacy of emotions at the opening of each conference and to encourage participants throughout to be authentic in their full human capacity. When asked to draw a diagram of their emotions during the 3-day conference, the majority of conference participants drew a picture of an emotional roller-coaster ride.

While both observed Future Search Conferences facilitated a new local knowledge base amongst the conference participants, this knowledge base could not be extended beyond the conference room and was therefore not drawn upon by the local Council for their formal decision-making processes. A minority of conference participants felt that more input from experts could *"have stopped a lot of useless squabble"* (male, business sector, Rushmoor).

### 5.5.3 Capacity Building Criteria

#### 5.5.3.1 New Contacts and Partnerships

Both Future Search Conferences facilitated very well the formation of new and the revival of old contacts amongst the conference participants: *"It's been helpful in establishing contacts with people within the Council but also within the local community, so that you got a name that you can contact if you got a query, a point that you want to raise, information you want on anything"* (female, voluntary sector, Rushmoor).

In Rushmoor and Olching, conference participants gave many examples of collaborative endeavours that had become possible as a result of these new or revived contacts. These often crossed stakeholder group boundaries. The owner of the largest supermarket in Olching had decided to introduce regionally grown foods onto the shelves of his store as a result of suggestions made to him at a Local Agenda 21 meeting, which he had attended following the conference. In Olching, conference participants reported that they now greeted more people in the street as a result of the conference. I conclude that the Future Search design is highly effective in creating a conference climate that is conducive to establishing rapport and trust between conference participants, and that lasting networks are formed as a result.

### **5.5.3.2 Learning**

This section will review the extent to which the investigated Future Search Conferences facilitated learning and systems thinking amongst the conference participants as set out in collaborative planning theory. In both case studies, participants reported that meeting other conference participants had widened their horizon about what was going on locally, what organisations existed and what they were doing. Participants in both case study conferences generally felt after the conference that they had a better overview of the local issues that needed tackling and some had discovered new opportunities for the future development of the area. Participants at both conferences realised the interconnections between seemingly disconnected issues. A particularly challenging kind of learning took place in the mixed small groups that had the task of performing an ideal future scenario together. Participants were forced to question their taken for granted assumptions about how the world should be. An important part of the learning was that prejudices against other stakeholder groups were broken down. A Green party member in the Olching conference reported:

I think a few people who I was sharing a table with and with whom I discussed a lot, will take me more seriously from now on, because they have realised that it is not my aim to get everybody to wear nose rings.

I conclude that learning is an inbuilt design feature of the Future Search Conference and happens in diverse ways.

### **5.5.3.3 Building Trust, Community Spirit and Reviving Local Democracy**

The Future Search Conferences have not significantly increased the trust between citizenry and Council in either of my case studies. This was first of all down to the fact that the conference by the nature of its composition collected the already converted, namely those who were known for their willingness to make an active contribution to the local community in a voluntary or professional capacity. Secondly, both conferences only involved a tiny proportion of councillors and

officers. Therefore, the conference offered little opportunity for the formal holders of political power to learn.

In both case studies, the fact that the Future Search Conferences took place and were considered a success has made Future Search a viable option for other Council or voluntary sector consultation processes. Moreover, both conferences stand as living examples that the citizenry does want to be involved in local decision-making processes. In both cases, a number of participants reported how their sense of belonging to the local community, of being a valued member of it, had increased as a result of the conference. They reported that their willingness to make a contribution to the local community had increased as a result of connecting with such a large number of people who seemed to care deeply about its future.

### 5.5.4 Outcome

#### 5.5.4.1 A Consensus Followed by Action

In both case study conferences, a consensus vision was achieved as envisaged by collaborative planning theory. Nevertheless, its quality was subject of great disappointment. First of all, few of the many innovative ideas generated by the ideal future groups translated into common ground statements. Secondly, the conference results lacked the detail to be meaningful, ignored financial considerations, failed to identify clear priorities and included a number of ill-thought-through ideas, for example a monorail in Rushmoor: *"It wasn't that I didn't like the outcomes or that they didn't match my own visions for the future, but I see few can realistically be implemented. Let's take an example. One of our visions was no unemployment any more. That is absolutely utopian. It won't be possible to achieve that. And I feel the same way about most things, no matter what is in the way, if it's money, the Council or the citizens."*

The participants explained these shortcomings in quality with reference to the time pressure at the conference. Somebody moreover suggested that the consensus had only been achievable because it was formulated in vague terms, had no direct financial implications and did not 'hurt' any sector's interests. It is also not an aim of the Future Search Conference design to facilitate tough negotiations about trade-offs and priorities. Instead it is hoped that over time, the common ground between the participants will grow through continuous communicative involvement.

The action groups which had formed during the last phase of the conference had achieved nothing visible on the ground 11–14 months after the conference. Only two out of six action groups (in both case study areas) were still meeting regularly a year after the conference while all other groups had dispersed. In Rushmoor, one of the most active groups was the 'Rushmoor Environment Forum', which initiated a 'Local Environment Award Scheme' for projects which are of benefit to the local environment. The award was actually given to a local group for the first time in November 1999. The other group in Rushmoor was the 'Rushmoor Arts Forum', which was struggling to secure an empty shop unit in one of Farnborough's big

halls for a community arts centre. In Olching, one of the active groups was trying to secure a self-managed meeting room for young people, while the other was trying to mobilise the resources for a community arts facility. Two years after each conference, these groups had not succeeded in their efforts but not given up either. While the outcomes of both Future Search Conferences were presented to the local Council, no vote was taken to commit Council resources to any of the specific project ideas generated.

## **5.6 The Future Search Conference in the Context of Power Relations**

### ***5.6.1 Explaining the Failure to Deliver***

An understanding of power relations inside and outside the conference room is crucial to making sense of what happens and fails to happen after a Future Search Conference. The Future Search Conference by design creates a win-win world of common goods and turns a blind eye to interests and conflicts. There were two instances worth mentioning during both case study conferences, where participants openly or secretly resisted the implicit and explicit rules and norms of the Future Search Conference. The majority of conference participants in both case studies considered the procedure prescribed for the identification of the common ground as highly unfair. As a result, there was weak ownership of the produced consensus and little will for implementation behind it. Issues which are decisive for the future development of the region were excluded from further discussion as 'unresolved differences', simply because they are highly controversial. Finally, a majority of conference participants were unpleasantly surprised that follow-up action was expected of them. When the action groups formed towards the end of the conference, some groups openly or secretly agreed not to meet again, thereby directly explaining half-hearted follow-up activities.

A Future Search Conference can only be as good as the context it is embedded in. Three more factors were decisive in explaining the lack of follow-up action in the two case study areas: (i) personalities, (ii) institutional gap between representative and participatory democracy and (iii) central-local government relations.

Both Future Search Conferences would never have taken place without the outstanding commitment of a few individuals. It was down to a withdrawal of these champions after the conference, that the follow-up process in both case study areas suffered from a lack of leadership. In the English case study, the former champions left their professional positions (and the area) for career advancement. In the German case study, those who had organised the Future Search Conference as volunteers decided that it was time for the Council's professional staff to take over the burden of coordination. In the absence of capable Council staff, this created a leadership vacuum.

A second major factor for explaining the lack of follow-up action was the institutional gap between the logic of representative democracy and the logic of

participatory democracy. A major problem of both Future Search Conferences was that they were not sufficiently linked to the formal decision-making processes of the Council. This is partly down to the fact that Local Agenda 21 processes in general tend to have weak links with Council decision-making, not least because of their emphasis on citizen empowerment. Secondly, a Future Search Conference has no inbuilt mechanism of transferring outcomes to the political decision-making process (authority rules). Instead, it is a case-by-case decision, if Council support is needed and how it may best be won. The combination of the Future Search Conference with the Local Agenda 21 process seems to pose a double institutionalisation problem.

In the English case study, the Future Search Conference was initiated by the Council but defined as 'for the people by the people', almost excluding the possibility of Council intervention. A joint forum of key activists from the conference and of interested councillors was created more than 2 years after the Future Search Conference, but had little to monitor as most follow-up activities had ceased by that time.

In Olching, there was from the beginning open conflict between conference steering group and elected councillors. Only one councillor from each party was invited to participate in the conference, thereby making the large majority of councillors feel excluded. The councillors therefore emphasised their role as elected representatives of the people and discredited the Future Search Conference as a self-selected lobby group which could not speak in the name of the people with any degree of legitimacy. The outcomes of the Future Search Conference were discussed in a Council meeting 9 months after the conference but no vote was taken on any concrete proposal. At a follow-up meeting 2 years after the conference, reassembled participants drafted Council motions which collaborating councillors had offered to submit to the Council for a vote. This change in strategy demonstrates that in order to be heard at all, LA21 activists were forced to adopt the practices of representative democracy.

Finally, even if there had been Council support, the decision-making power for many of the issues raised by the conference participants is not found at the local level. The future of Olching's agricultural sector lies in the hands of the European and national agricultural politics, the future of troop residence in Rushmoor is a decision of the national Ministry of Defense. The successful implementation of Local Agenda 21 processes will therefore have to be embedded in effective multi-level cooperation. This is a factor which is painfully absent in British and Germany Agenda 21 processes.

### ***5.6.2 Implications for the Use of Future Search Conferences***

The empirical evidence presented above suggests a number of strengths of the Future Search Conference as a method of stakeholder involvement. A Future Search Conference is strong at building appreciation of diversity and shared meaning amongst a diverse group of stakeholders. It facilitates new contacts across stakeholder boundaries, trust and joint action on a one-to-one basis. It widens the participants' horizon and challenges anyone who believes they hold the single truth

on an issue. The strength of Future Search is that it builds understanding and a sense of community where there was division and indifference prior to the conference.

One of the central weaknesses of the Future Search Conference according to the empirical evidence presented above is that it is rather ill-designed to facilitate concessions from powerful sectors. Instead, Future Search facilitates the lowest common denominator – an outcome that does not hurt the interests of any party to the conference, which makes it in many ways unthreatening. The effectiveness of a Future Search Conference therefore crucially depends on the cooperation of the powerful and their willingness to take Future Search outcomes forward. Finding constructive ways of engaging those who may feel that their power base is threatened by the Future Search exercise, is therefore a key condition for success of a Future Search Conference. For the case of Local Agenda 21 and the cause of sustainable development, there may be cases where conflict strategies based on social movements, boycotts or direct action are preferable strategies for pressure groups to further sustainable development than to adhere to the ideals of collaborative planning theory (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). For issues involving conflicting interests, mediation might be a more promising method to use.

While the contribution of community-based Future Search Conferences to capacity building for democracy should not be discounted, the two investigated case studies have certainly given much reason to conclude on a word of caution. As the case study material presented above has shown, the outcomes of both Future Search Conferences never even made it to the decision-making stage. Action groups proved unable to sustain themselves and to win wider support. The key reason was the missing link between the institutions of participatory and representative democracy. Successful Future Search applications will therefore require a distinct move to power sharing and institutional innovation at the interface between formal and informal structures of governance. In the absence of such changes, the outcomes of Future Search Conferences in particular, and collaborative planning practices in general are destined to remain little more than castles in the air.

The challenge of bringing issues of power, democracy and sustainable development together has most recently been addressed in the field of transition management, reflexive governance for sustainable development and work on discursive politics (Fischer, 2003; Voß, Bauknecht, & Kemp, 2006). New ideas for overcoming the problems of participatory processes employed for sustainable development are being developed there.

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