

## FUTURE SEARCH CONFERENCE IN NEUSIEDL AM SEE

We have chosen the methodology of a search conference introduced by Marvin R. Weisbord from USA and Matthias zur Bensen called „Zukunftskonferenz“ in German speaking countries. The Institute of Soil Research at BOKU in Vienna is preparing an Erasmus IP in Neusiedl am See this year. We want to explain for the city of Neusiedl am See the kind of living, which means 2t–3t CO<sub>2</sub>/per person/a by 2050 instead of 7-11 CO<sub>2</sub> t/per person/a, at the moment within industrial countries. We want to show for Neusiedl am See, how the inhabitants can reach this limits with a sustainable life style and want also discuss these criteria with local stakeholders and politicians.

Future search conferences as a new planning process, bring people together with diverse interests to create shared vision, innovation and collaborative action and do joint planning.

We need a new paradigm in **planning**. Weisbord for example, describes idealized planning and interactive processes of learning, empowering, democratizing and partnering. He shows within the functioning of future search conferences, how to increase everybody's power at all levels, sharing information and fostering learning processes.

The power of a future search is that it gives people the tools they need to build from 'common ground' and to visualize a shared destination. The conference uses a systematic process in which groups design the future they want and strategies for achieving it.

### Functioning of Future Search Conferences

A future search conference is a concentrated, intense way of working, well suited for strategy and planning processes. In a search conference the participants, design the system's most desired future and formulate creative strategies to bring that future about.

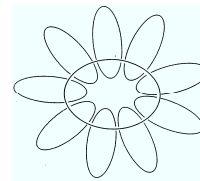
Each conference is unique, tailored to specific requirements. The conference design by the conference manager provides the structure, the process and the content produced by the participants. The structure means participant selection, time limits and the sequence of group and plenary sessions

outlined in the program. The process refers to interpersonal and group dynamics that take place in relation to this structure.

The way of working and the rules for group discussions combines **system thinking** with democratic strategy processes. People's best thinking and positive energy are released to create tangible results, including real breakthroughs in tough situations. The Vision is made up of the group's hopes and dreams as a common goal, a picture of what they see going on in their future. Within search conferences there are certain rules, where conference participants are asked to find agreement, the 'common ground' on which all can stand.

### 1. The whole system in one room

The method is based on 'the whole system in one room', so that everybody can join in the necessary decisions. The process deals with the total system and produces an integrated plan. In today's complex world, a system-wide analysis of key issues and multi-dimensional responses to them are necessary to meet the challenges of rapidly changing situations for any organization or business. Planning is done by the people who will carry it out.

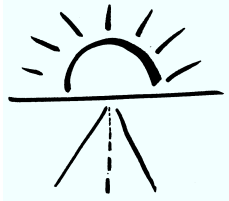


Transdisciplinarity offers the prospect of generating the relevant knowledge which implies cooperative research driven by social needs and through mutual learning. **Transdisciplinarity** is a new form of learning and problem solving involving cooperation among different parts of society and academia in order to meet complex challenges of society.

This approach assumes that each planning team has the wisdom and experience to decide what they need, and provides a systematic way of making those decisions.

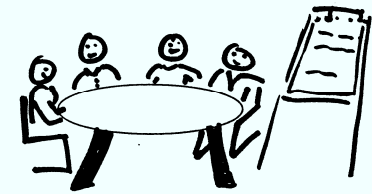
### 2. Focuses on the future and on possibilities more than problems

Each participant telling about an orientation about the background based on historical understanding. Search processes also assume that development is a continuing process, where the past and the future meet in the present. You must know a system's history to understand its present situation, and you



must understand the present to influence the future in desired directions. The conference focuses on the future, and on possibilities more than problems. The way of working leads to cross-disciplinary and cross-functional cooperation.

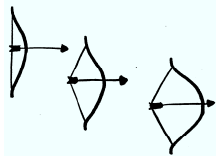
### 3. Utilize selfmanagement in group working, for reducing dependency and refusal



The key to social responsibility is that stakeholders have an equal chance to influence decisions. We seek to build an atmosphere of **trust** that yields a deeper and non-superficial search of the trends in the environment. A general rule for all

groups is that members have an equal chance to express their views. All opinions and perspectives must be respected by all the participants.

### 4. Discovering 'common ground'



Show how you can use strategic conferences, based on discovering 'common ground' and imagining ideal futures, to improve planning within and between all sectors of government, education and administration.

"Traditional forms of academic exchange follow different patterns than those required by

the learning system intended here. Most helpful is to create together the context for the learning endeavour in a conscious way and to agree on carefully designed procedures of action and reflection giving enough safety to permit the next steps into unknown spaces. Having experienced this form of learning together fosters relationships and generates a unique kind of **social capital** that cannot be created in another way."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> STRASSER, Rosa (2004): The Social Culture of the Intensive Programme: IPSOIL: in: Academia Danubiana. Nr. 1/2005. p.5-7 <http://academia-danubiana.net/projects/IPSOIL/IPSOIL%20I/IP1.pdf>

## THE SEARCH CONFERENCE PROCESS

### Background

Synthesis is an important step for establishing methods of knowledge integration. The **conceptual** model of the real world, being able to predict the results of actions taken in the problem solution. Conceptualizing means comprising the term, respectively composing or drafting a project. The key for successful work at this stage is synthesis and integration, organized by methods of knowledge integration (Future Search workshops, Life Cycle Assessment, etc.)

The Intensive program "Permaculture Design Course-The city of the Future" in Neusiedl am See will give the participants the philosophy behind ecological design and planning applied in practice, in particular in the field of transdisciplinary management for renewable resources in permaculture and sustainable land use. Permaculture design is a system of assembling conceptual, material and strategic components in a pattern which functions to benefit life in all its forms. **Learning** as integral part of planning has become an important area of practice. We have chosen the methodology of a 'future search conference' that gives people the tools they need for developing a shared vision, systems thinking and team learning.

The actual plan for our future search workshop was depending on the time available, the number of participants and their special needs. We have chosen a workshop for one day, with plenary presentations and to develop planning issues based on consensus, and that creative options would enable actions for the following semester.

### Phase 0: Introduction

First we will try to get an overview and detailed information about our personal experiences – where do we come from, what we are doing, what do we want to share with the group? We will get new ideas for our planning considerations.

### Phase 1 Searching for 'Common Ground'

For **understanding** the case of a real-world problem within its history, constraints, dynamics, and uniqueness we need key epistemics of cognition by empathy, feeling, pictorial representation in memory and intuitive comprehension. For identifying the problem, goals objectives and aims are defined. See application 2012<sup>2</sup>. This year we are changing the objectives.<sup>3</sup>

The IP-workshop 2013/ 2014 in Neusiedl am See has **four topics**:

Ecology (Agriculture and forestry), Architecture & Spatial Planning, Solidarity Economy and Culture & Identity. The process is starting with a presentation and discussion about the four topics, completed with three excursions (ecology, soil research and renewable energies.)

We were using brainstorming for sharing common information about the project. All inputs will be recorded on flip charts and hang on the wall in the seminar room. This scanning of the environment is setting the tone for the workshop. This simple technology assists in the symbolic representation of the shared world of the participants. They can see that their perception is legitimately a part of the whole group.

### Phase 2 External and Desirable Trends – Mind map

In the second phase attention is drawn to the present. First we will analyse external trends which may have consequences to our work. Assuming a thorough phase one, the workshop repeats the above procedure in the second phase. This time the group brainstorms trends that are washing over the focal system. The probable trends are those they consider likely to extend into the future weather they are desired or not.

The upcoming challenges for the project are worked out through **mind mapping**. Using brainstorming, the group suspends judgement and evaluation and allows for conflicting observations to be expressed. In "landscape of thoughts", which has to be devised together, the participants are collecting all the relevant themes and are arranging them in a clear form.

<sup>2</sup> PDC-Aspern [http://academia-danubiana.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2012o\\_12.04.28\\_PDC-AS\\_APPLICATION-TEXT\\_Fotos.web\\_iterature.pdf](http://academia-danubiana.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2012o_12.04.28_PDC-AS_APPLICATION-TEXT_Fotos.web_iterature.pdf) see top 4.1 and 4.2

<sup>3</sup> PDC-NEU\_The city of the future. [http://academia-danubiana.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/2013s\\_13.03.08\\_FINAL\\_PDC-NEU\\_IP\\_2013\\_unterschriebener-Antrag.pdf](http://academia-danubiana.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/2013s_13.03.08_FINAL_PDC-NEU_IP_2013_unterschriebener-Antrag.pdf) p.27

In a next step, these themes will be evaluated with the help of stickers (**diagnosis**). This method allows all the participants to quickly gain an overview of the complexity of the issue. Such an overview is an important tool of information and orientation in the process of developing one's opinion and intentions. The group then moves to sort these trends into desirable and probable **categories**.

### Phase 4 Future Scenarios

This phase explicitly calls for **creativity and innovation**. The future of the system can now be designed using ideal characteristics that reflect the participants' values. This phase is not directed toward concrete strategies or solutions, although they might be suggested during brainstorming. On the contrary, we suggest people devise curative, unconventional and surprising conceptions of what the system ought to be. This kind of activity is best performed in small groups. When a small group generates enough design characteristics they switch their work with another group.

### Phase 5 Formulation strategies

The formulation of strategies follow the same mode as the previous phase. Small groups generate the means by which the **idealized future** can be attained and develop a list of strategies that the group endorses. A copy of the idealized future document is supplied to each work group so that the targeted future is the same negotiated future they can strive for.

### Phase 6 Plans for action

At the end, we produce action plans. In our process, the first step is to identify causes of problems in a definite number of areas. Groups then suggest possible remedies. The next step for each problem area is specifying what can be done during the Intensive program in Neusiedl am See by whom, how and when.

Finally it is the epistemic of **causal explanation** based on arguments. The Students will work in small groups on themes of ecological design – architecture, solidarity economy, etc. - and may concentrate on different problems. Finally, each group present plans with different priorities for various actions, what they are going to do within the permaculture design course and discuss these in the plenary.

### Literature:

WEISBORD, Marvin, R. (1993): Discovering Common Ground. San Franzisko: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.