

**"Austria and the World
at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a New Year's Listening Post**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

Theme 1: Availability of capabilities

Capabilities for education and development of most individuals are diminishing: financial resources as well as educational and emotional availability. The gap between academic families with lots of capabilities and the majority of families with shrinking educational possibilities is felt as growing rapidly. The resulting struggle for resources is fought asymmetrically, which leads to feelings of frustration, fear and anger. The group would like to assume more power and engage for change, but feels powerless at the moment.

Theme 2: Power and its distribution

The group states that the social disciplines are felt as powerless, excluded from financial resources and therefore inefficient to social change. The 'hard' disciplines, such as economics, are efficient to society, but contribute more to the widening of the social gap than to its integration. The whole group agrees that the Austrian society should develop further its 'social technologies'.

Theme 3: Containing of suffering

We are confronted via media with so much suffering in the world, much more we can hold and manage. This situation of immobility towards things we would like to change immediately, the contrast between our wish for activity and the sense of passivity is hard to contain. Development of a 'culture of empathy' – We don't listen to each other. Even here in the group, our lively and eloquent style of discussion leads to the passivity of some members in the group. At this point a discussion starts about power and elites. Do some few organized members influence society more than the many unorganized ones? How much leadership does a dialogue need to be fruitful? Which steps are to be made, in order to enhance our capacity to listen?

Theme 4: Discussion in the group

General greed, and we are part of it. Since society is quite greedy, the capabilities are being distributed asymmetrically. This leads to the wealthy becoming more wealthy and the poorer getting less. Ten Percent of the population has more than needed, and many lack the necessary. The better our financial security the more consumerism we develop. We think we really need the commodities we could afford. How could change happen? Of course the powerful ones will not start the process, how can we empower the weak? Are there technologies to authorize the powerless? How do we as Listening Post manage power and distribution? We all long for appreciation and being heard. Therefore we engage in speaking, but while we speak we are not capable of listening to others. Conflicts arise there from, which generate tension and frustration in the group.

Volunteering Parts of the group find it useful for social change to invest their time in volunteering. Other parts of the group see volunteering as a nice individual act which stabilizes a systemic problem instead of solving it. A lively discussion takes place in the group, the single voices arise but are not given time and space to develop their whole chain of thought. The group seems to interrupt individual voices while they develop a thought, a sort of competition for time and space in the group is observable. Very interesting ideas are presented, and eloquent members succeed in getting attention.

Theme 5: The difficulties in assuming power

At this point of the process, the sanguine discussion style in the group is evaluated by a part of the group as inhibiting other parts of the group. A dispute begins about the evaluation being felt as inappropriate. Part of the group reacts very emotional and feels hurt by the judgement of the other part of the group. After a very confronting sequence the group calms down and starts trying to make meaning out of the conflict: How can we empower our self to change things in society without being destructive? Can we empower ourselves without suppressing others? Which techniques of authorization lead to hurt others, and are there ways of empowering oneself without hurting others? At this point the discussion is lively and engaged, but the time is run out. The group would like to continue working, but the time boundary frustrates its attempts.

Theme 6: Search for meaning

On the one hand traditional spaces for the generation of meaning, like spiritual and religious groups are not seen as efficient. On the other hand there is very much hope that the new technological developments, which are partly used already, like social medias and other social technologies will be fruitful. The group is very optimistic that future dialogues will be both integrating and mindful, particularly in large group settings.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. The three interrelated hypotheses followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

Hypothesis 1

Societal Splitting in regards of educational capabilities

Because of the widening gap in society between different social strata, parts of society are drifting further and further apart. They tend to be less in contact with one another. Individuals feel therefore isolated. Action plans to step out of this isolation are yet to be built, which leads to a sense of powerlessness. The group mirrors this process in its discussion. There is fear of isolation which encourages creativity and eloquence in trying to solve problems, but the attempts of problem solving are not well orchestrated and therefore create conflicts and tension. An integrative function is missing, a 'social technique' that can ease the disappointment between the powerful and the powerless and the frustration arising there from.

Hypothesis 2

Difficulties in assuming power

Because of the longing for power to change things, members of society try hard to find answers to practical questions: How can we empower our self to change things in society? Can we empower ourselves without suppressing others? Which techniques of authorization lead to hurt others, and are there ways of empowering oneself without hurting others? How much leadership do we need in order to work on the task of gaining more societal influence?

Hypothesis 3

Boundaries of our capacity to listen

Because of rapid changes in society, members of society are forced to adjust their identities very quickly, which would need time and space to contemplate on themselves. At same time, though, they are willing to solve societal splitting right now and would love to contribute to the political process effectively and immediately. This double bind situation leads to an agitated atmosphere, where individuals engage to the process with their very heart, but seem not to get in contact with the other side, which leads to a sense of frustration.

Convener: Simon Severino