

The stability of the democratic institutions relies on an unspoken assumption which has huge implications: citizens are collectively sovereign, yet as individuals they have typically no time no resources and no will to be involved in public issues. It is therefore in the interest of the community to empower an *élite* of enlightened and qualified individuals to take decisions on behalf of the people. This, however, may have painful consequences: in time of crisis, when the legitimacy of the entire political class is put into question, citizens who have been long kept aside from the political debate and are therefore unfamiliar with its contents and language, are likely to commit themselves on demagogues offering simplified visions and drastic solutions. However, a lesson on how a widespread discontent with the political class can foster innovative action and revive democratic processes comes from the *far North*. Guðjón Már Guðjónsson, one of the leaders of a movement that rediscovered, thanks also to the modern information

technologies, the role of citizens' direct engagement, bears witness of this. Iceland is perhaps the Country that experienced the most traumatic consequences of the financial crisis: the disruption of the banking system, followed by its renationalisation, threw Iceland into the abyss of an unprecedented currency crisis. Faced with the "blood and tears" IMF conditions and the threats from international creditors, the population reacted taking to the streets: the "*Pots and Pans Revolution*" got, a unique case in Europe, the elected Government to step back from the austerity program it had previously accepted. But that was not the end of the story. A group of good-willing people began to think bigger, asking themselves how the crisis could be exploited to call into question not only the program of this or that government, but the very principles of representative democracy, going back to the roots of the social contract and giving voice to citizens once again. The result was a real bottom up constituent initiative, at first

through the think tank "*Ministry of Ideas*," then by convening a National Assembly, composed of a random sample of Icelanders who, teamed up in small working groups, developed a manifesto of the values on which to base the reconstruction of the Country. This experiment was so successful that in 2010 the National Parliament itself entrusted a similar Assembly of ordinary citizens with the enunciation of the principles inspiring the new Constitution. This proves that engaging citizens does not always favour anti-politics movements: on the contrary, going back to the *agora* can prevent the discredit for the political class from turning into disrepute for democracy *tout court*. It can provide politicians with a vision of the future that will not only inspire but also legitimate their action. We deem that the viability of applying such a lesson to bigger national communities in Europe should be seriously assessed.

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GUÐJÓNSSON

CROWDSOURCING DEMOCRACY: REVIVING AN ANCIENT UTOPIA IN A MODERN STYLE

“Experience has shown that when gathered in a safe and authentic environment a diverse group of citizens can form a basis for national or community visioning which is based on sound human principles.”

Telos: We are fascinated by the "Ministry of Ideas" think tank. Could you tell us where you drew the inspiration for such an initiative from, and could you outline its main achievements?

Bjarni Snæbjörn Jónsson/Guðjón Már Guðjónsson: The *Ministry of Ideas* was created in January 2009, just after the financial collapse as a new way to approach the various challenges the nation was facing. The creation of this pure grassroots organised Ministry was motivated by the fact that the "political" Ministries were busy and stuck on working on the past. There was no real activities focusing on the future and thinking about the country's future direction. Another motivation factor for the creation of this grassroots ministry was to question the former leadership format, where few politicians decided on the nation's core values and vision. Members of the grassroots did question this old form and wanted to challenge the legacy leadership format.

The financial crisis has quickly turned into a political one, in Iceland as well as in the EU. The increasing discontent of the public opinion in many European countries of how their respective political class dealt with the crisis has undermined the consensus supporting democratic Institutions. In turn, politicians have often express skepticism about direct democracy movements as a threat to liberal democracy. In light of your experience, how do you think that bottom-up initiatives can virtuously interact with the dynamics of parliamentary representation?

In addition to the developments on new democratic models within the *Ministry of ideas* in 2009, nine individuals formed a group in Iceland called the "*Anthill*", that organized a so called *National Assembly* in Iceland in November of that year involving a *random sample* of the nation. This was an attempt to engage the citizens of Iceland in a visioning dialogue to form a shared vision. At the same time, it was a social experiment and we took great care in capturing all the data from the dialogue. We invited politicians and institutional leaders in Iceland to be there as well and be involved like any other who was attending. The format was carefully planned so as to secure an authentic dialogue between all participants. We think this experiment was successful, in fact a year later the Parliament of Iceland decided to call for a similar citizen communicative Assembly



Guðjón Már Guðjónsson is an Icelandic entrepreneur which made of technological innovation his creed. In 1990, aged only 17, he founded OZ, a company developing telecommunication software. His commitment in the development of digital technologies, led him to patent a software for the interaction between anonymous users over the Internet or other platforms in 2000. In 2009 he was selected by the *Junior Chamber International* among the *Ten Outstanding Young Persons of the World*. In the same year, Guðjón founded the "*Ministry of Ideas*", a non-partisan grassroots *forum* for the development of innovative initiatives in economic and social policy. In the same year, he was among the organizers of the National Assembly, composed of a random sample of Icelandic citizens. In 2010 he founded *Agora*, a non-profit think tank engaged in developing the format of Visioning Forums to promote political debate among citizens. *Agora* developed the model for the Visioning Assembly of citizens which debated over the key principles for the revision of the Constitution of Iceland. For the purpose of this interview, Guðjón collaborated with his fellow countryman **Bjarni Snæbjörn Jónsson**, a business consultant with extensive experience in human systems change and evolution. Bjarni is currently conducting a PhD research at the Adizes Graduate School in California on the role of Citizen Communicative Engagement in Social Issues, and its impact on conscious evolution of human social systems. Previously, he was Managing Partner of the Icelandic division of the consulting firm Capacent, and CEO for its operations in Denmark in 2006-2007.

to prepare for the revision of the Constitution. According to our experience this kind of citizen engagement is applicable in any kind of community and organization and has been tried out as such in many occasions in Iceland subsequent to the 2009 National Assembly.

We argue experience has shown that when gathered in a safe and authentic environment a diverse group of citizens can form a basis for national or community visioning which is based on sound human principles. We have also found that such an organ could be a bridge between the public and political institutions in grounding policy initiatives with the general public thereby fostering understanding and support. Furthermore, the momentum such gatherings create for change and renewal is quite substantial, which indicates the potential of such events for increased and meaningful engagement of citizens in their own social affairs.

The rapid expansion of banks' leverage and their subsequent inability to repay their debts drove Iceland to a massive financial, currency and economic crisis. A simple way to describe and explain this process is to resort to moral categories, such as greed or hybris. Others would rather blame the massive process of privatisation and deregulation occurred in the financial sector over the past decades. What is your view?

It is a bit complicated to explain in short what actually were the reasons for the situation in Iceland up to and leading to the severity of the financial crisis. Since the early nineties, Iceland enjoyed economic growth every consecutive year until 2008. Icelanders experienced prosperity beyond they had previously had and everyone was led to believe this came as a result of good public policy and leadership in the framework of increased economic freedom, thanks to privatizations. And it was the case in many ways, in the beginning at least. Icelanders found themselves in a sort of positive reinforcement cycle, which encouraged people to do more and get more success based on previous good experience. The privatization of the banks was, however, a sort of paradigm shift. Parallel to that happening, money started to become amply available on world markets. Thus, it was relatively easy for the banks to finance growth beyond their means and they had a lot of money to lend. This resulted in prices of stocks and companies rising to very high and unrealistic levels and people were led to believe there was no end to it. The underlying way of thinking was somewhat like that of a teenager who suddenly finds himself in a very profitable situation with a lot of money to spend, without really understanding the reason for it. It was not until the consequences were written on the wall and the Fear crept in that all the limiting beliefs and behaviors associated with it became evident, such as corruption, greed, short term thinking and more. Everyone tried to save their own skin and thus undermined the situation further by their survival behavior.

A lively debate is going on in our country on which is the best suited economic policy agenda to revive Italy's productivity and growth, while at the same time maintaining a budget's surplus. How do you think the Government may positively contribute to an innovation-led economic growth – can regulation be as effective as public subsidies and investments?

Facilitation of innovation through collaboration is definitely one way which has to be considered in many ways like the *Ministry of Ideas* has been engaged in and proposed. Modern technology allows for much closer and more efficient collaboration on joint projects than before. We just don't quite know how to use it for innovative collaboration. Combining citizen engagement through Visioning and Innovation Forum creates a momentum for action. However, coupled with that, a supporting infrastructure will have to be in place to facilitate further collaboration with citizens. That is where the role of Governments, be they local, regional or national, comes into play to facilitate such pathway for citizen engagement and collaboration. Moreover, companies seeking to give a positive contribution to the wellbeing their community can also be a part of such a virtuous scheme, through initiatives having well-defined objectives and measurable outcomes.