Chapter 2 – Participatory wisdom for achieving wiser decision-making

"*We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom.*
The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers,
people able to put together the right information
at the right time, think critically about it,
and make important choices wisely."

– E. O. Wilson, biologist

"*The predicament of Western man...*
is a failure to develop wisdom proportionate to power...
Wisdom in this context is the understanding
of other minds and of one's own mind
in such a way that one knows what are his basic needs,
the needs of others,
and the most important needs of human kind."

– Henry Nelson Wieman, theologian

Wisdom?

What is wisdom? And what kind of wisdom do we need to create and maintain a sustainable civilization on a healthy planet?

Wisdom is typically viewed in terms of guidelines, policies or actions that brilliantly take into account the needs of the moment within a larger picture that often involves prudence (thought for the future) and compassion (considering the well-being of others). Wisdom is way bigger than narrow self-interest and tends to be grounded in some deeper understandings about life, often based on extensive experience, which is why so many of us associate wisdom with age and

reflection.

We usually ascribe wisdom to ancient traditions and to wise individuals. These important sources of wisdom are, however, inadequate to deal with today's unprecedented global challenges that are being co-created by many, most, or all of us collectively, thanks to our poorly structured and guided economic and technological power. Even with an abundance of wise people and traditions among us, we're still collectively moving towards catastrophe.

Folly and its antidotes

Wisdom is the opposite of folly. Folly occurs to the extent

- we are self-interested to the exclusion of others
- we think in narrow or short-term perspectives; *and*
- we fail to take important factors into account, such that our efforts become misaligned with reality and thus fail or generate undesirable "side effects".

Folly deepens as these phenomena recur and we fail to learn from our experience.

We could say that arrogance and/or ignorance lie at the heart of folly. We generate folly to the extent we are unwilling and/or unable to consider the needs, perspectives, information and gifts of others. Conversely, a thorough and creative inclusion of all relevant needs, perspective, information and gifts – including our own – greatly increases our ability to generate and apply wisdom.

Relevance, of course, involves choosing what to include and exclude in order to properly bound our inquiries and is thus vital to intelligent deliberation. But since relevance is a judgment call, its exclusionary function is easily and frequently abused. However, reality comes back to bite us if we exclude factors we unwisely dismissed as irrelevant. So wisdom, though necessarily selective, tends to have an inclusive bias in order to adequately cover the full scope of the situation being considered.

This inclusive bias suggests that certain forms of participation could help us generate wisdom, especially when dealing with today's public affairs where *collective* wisdom is so urgently needed, as in politics, governance and economics.

Sustainability and wisdom

We also find sustainability clearly reflected in this framing of wisdom. Let us imagine that the needs, perspectives, information and gifts of all relevant parties – including nature – are well

considered in formulating a policy or action. Would it not stand to reason that such a policy or action would encounter less resistance and difficulty, and would tend to generate greater benefits over a longer period than if it had ignored the needs, perspectives, information and gifts of relevant parties? This could, in fact, be considered the essence of sustainability.

Interestingly enough, we can trace the folly and unsustainability of our current civilization largely to its tendency to systematically exclude the needs, views, information and gifts of relevant parties – especially marginalized populations and natural life forms and systems – in its major decisions and systemic designs. Perhaps most notably, concentrated wealth controls both markets and governance by nurturing and manipulating people's ignorance, materialism, insecurity and short-term self-interest at the expense of their long-term well-being and their healthy impulses on behalf of each other and nature.

The actual structures of our economic and political systems – from majoritarianism to monetized profit – increasingly enable that manipulation. Therefore, it should come as no surprise, that our current systems generate far more folly than wisdom. As crises, scarcity and polarization are increasingly generated by our collective unsustainability, this lack of wisdom promises to become more acute. The further we go along this path, the more radical restructuring of society will be necessary. And the sooner and better we promote participatory wisdom, the less traumatic that restructuring will be.

Basic principles

What is the nature of participatory wisdom?

The phrase suggests that many people – even everybody – are involved in generating such wisdom.

But we need to keep in mind that we're talking about wisdom here, not just any collective decisions and actions. The decisions and actions that people are participating in need to be much wiser than what our current markets and democracies (and other systems) deliver now. So we don't just want people involved; we want them involved in co-creating wise policies, actions and outcomes. How do we manage that?

Given our current political and economic arrangements, letting everyone do what they like is not likely to generate the wisdom we want. Even if we could (and could afford to) get everyone involved, too often the old habits, power dynamics and ignorance would drag us back into the folly we're trying to transcend.

So we need to explore, in particular, two main dimensions of participatory wisdom, i.e., civic wisdom and economic wisdom.

Civic wisdom embraces the wisdom potentially produced through politics, governance and community and refers to how wise our policies and communal undertakings are. Civic wisdom is

largely based on conversation and decision-making processes.[2]
Economic wisdom, on the other hand, refers to how wise the ultimate results of economic activity are in terms of long-range benefits to people and to the well-being of natural systems. "Economic activity" here includes both the monetized production and distribution of goods and services as well as non-monetized means for meeting individual and group needs on a daily basis such as self-generated pleasures, volunteer activities, direct care of loved ones and even the ongoing unacknowledged productivity of nature.[3]

Participatory civic wisdom

In considering participatory civic wisdom, we need to realize it is rare that we can involve everyone. Given the number and complexity of challenges and tasks in public affairs and the size of populations usually involved, it is seldom even advisable to try. But what is the alternative? Who else but "everyone" is truly qualified to do the job in a democracy? Public officials? Experts? How do we make democracy both authentically participatory and wise?

Let's work backward from the product: As we consider the wisdom of a civic decision made by some people on behalf of a larger community, we can and should ask the following:

- How thoroughly did they understand the relevant issues and options?
- How fair and inspired is their decision? and
- How well do the ultimate results of their decision align with their community's values, the needs of all stakeholders, and the general welfare of society and the world?

Meeting these conditions is a tall order. These folks are going to need some support and structure to pull it off (a topic to which we'll soon turn). We can't afford to give resource-intensive support to everyone. In participatory wisdom, then, when a community is too large to engage everyone in effectively making a wise decision, the task may be delegated to a group to make that decision on behalf of the community. Let's look at three characteristics we should ensure in any such group and its decision-making process.

1. *Quality diversity*: The group reflects and embodies the diversity and character of their community.
2. *Quality information*: They are well informed. Before they make their decision, they know what's going on with the issue.
3. *Quality interaction*: They work together productively, using their diversity and information creatively to come to wise agreements.

In other words, a group can generate useful civic wisdom for a larger community if it embodies the relevant diversity, has the relevant information, and uses its differences creatively to craft agreements that are potent because they address everyone's relevant concerns. Modern selection, dialogue, deliberation, and informational methodologies have the capacity to deliver these specifications to the extent possible in any given moment, and ongoing iterative approaches

have the capacity to pick up what has been missed on the way.

We can see these principles applied to some extent in hundreds of cases around the world, although seldom very consciously as wisdom-generation and seldom in circumstances where the resulting wisdom is actually implemented. It will take a movement to change that.

Let's look more closely at what such a movement would need to attend to.

Quality Diversity

A major indicator of having sufficient diversity is that diverse members of the community can see themselves – their "type of person" – fairly represented in the deliberative group. Furthermore, to the extent the group engages the community in its deliberations, they further connect the community's diversity and creativity into the outcome. In organizing such an intentionally diverse group we are explicitly not taking for granted that merely showing up, being elected, or being an expert qualifies someone to stand for a whole community. In fact, without discounting experts and public officials, we often use random selection or some other rigorous way of ensuring relevant diversity is present in the group.

Quality diversity refers to the diversity of participants, the diversity of perspectives, and the diversity of forms of intelligence. We want to creatively engage people's full human capacities, including reason, emotion, intuition, humor, movement, and aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities and capacities. We want to include a full spectrum of viewpoints, sometimes referred to as "*the whole system in the room*", which in practice means including diverse voices from the whole situation. In conflicted situations, for example, we want people present who come from each of the various parties or stakeholder categories involved. We want people with diverse (especially opposed) interests and views; we want people who are or will be impacted by the decision; we want people who know a lot about the issues involved as well as diverse people holding relevant power in the situation. In organizational conversations, we want people from all levels of the hierarchy (if any) and from all departments and sections, as well as people from populations who are resources for or are benefited or impacted by the organization's activities. Sometimes even people we consider outsiders make key contributions, so we sometimes have a culture of “welcoming the stranger”.

In public issue deliberations or community visioning or reflection, we want a wide variety of community members. To a certain extent this can be accomplished with open forums which include invitations to, active recruitment of, and logistical supports for certain kinds of people less likely to show up on their own, such as child care for parents or audiovisual aids for less literate or verbal people. If the conversation is sponsored by officials or is otherwise likely to have direct impact on the community, we will probably want to use random and/or scientific selection of diverse participants who together demonstrably reflect or embody the demographic profile of the community from which they were selected. Random selection not only embodies the community's diversity and helps observers feel represented, but also reduces the prospect of corruption or of people participating as their public roles rather than as their unique creative individual selves.

Quality Information

A wisdom-generating group needs to know the relevant facts of the issue they are considering and to gain a certain level of nuanced understanding. They need to know the issue's history, its internal dynamics and social and environmental impacts, the values at stake, and the arguments and interests of parties promoting and opposing various solutions. In organizing such a group, we do not take for granted that people already know enough about the issue, nor that one or two perspectives are sufficient to generate wisdom. In particular, we want participants to be aware of the big picture within which the issue exists and the systemic dynamics that drive it and within which it must be addressed.

Quality information overlaps with quality diversity insofar as we want to include a full spectrum of information from diverse perspectives and sources. One way is to create briefing materials for citizen deliberators delineating multiple approaches to the issue they're deliberating, a practice known as "framing the issue for deliberation". In contentious issues and conflicts we want to include a balance of perspectives, both to avoid real or perceived bias and to expand the way people view the issue.

Informational quality also involves truthfulness, usefulness and accessibility. Can people depend on the information, or at least consider various critiques of it? Is it relevant and fairly comprehensive? Does it tell the whole story – or at least not have important information intentionally withheld, distorted or manipulated? Is it accessible – both in terms of availability and the appropriateness of media to suit the cognitive styles of the viewers? We often want to include multi-media – not just written data but pictures, stories, live testimony and cross-examination of experts, audio-video materials, performance, and various forms of engagement like role-playing and imaginative exercises.

Systemically, as a democratic society, quality information requires freedom of speech, freedom of the press (including all information sources), and informational transparency regarding the activities of concentrated powers like governments and large corporations so they can be evaluated by the public who can then participate as informed citizens, producers, and consumers.

Finally, does the information embrace the depth and breadth of the topic? Does it clarify or highlight system conditions and dynamics; interrelationships between various factors; contexts like history and trends, culture and power, place and circumstance; deep human needs and aspirations; likely consequences, possibilities, and values associated with various views and options; people's guiding narratives and assumptions; etc. – in other words, does it help people understand the meaning of the issue and various approaches to it?

Some approaches that support collective wisdom include the following:

- Consulting global wisdom traditions and broadly shared ethical principles like the Golden Rule;

- Seeking guidance from natural patterns, as seen in ecology, biomimicry, permaculture, evolutionary studies, and indigenous and agricultural cultures;
- Applying systems thinking – from flows, feedback and overshoot, to chaos and complexity sciences;
- Using holistic thinking that integrates seeming opposites or that places diverse phenomena in clarifying models like spectrums, scales, and developmental sequences;
- Assuming a deep-time perspective, especially concerning the well-being of future generations, long-term or slowly-developing impacts, and the need for both prudence (as in the Precautionary Principle[4]) and courageous innovation.

The more this kind of information can be seriously considered in a deliberation, the more likely the outcome(s) will be wise.

Quality Interaction

Instead of merely asserting and fighting, a wisdom-generating group use their diversity creatively to reach beyond oversimplified short-term answers. They critically explore probable results – both good and bad – of various solutions, looking far into the future to envision lasting broad benefits that fit their community's values and the constraints of nature. They take each other's (and their community's and various stakeholders') concerns seriously as guides and stimulants to develop previously unseen options they can all support. In organizing such a group, we do not take for granted that participants will automatically look deeply enough and far enough to generate shared wisdom, but provide opportunities and guidance to encourage that deeper view, and to help them hear each other well and navigate through their differences towards valuable common ground.

Quality of interaction depends on forms of organization or conversational process, the quality of actual conversations and their facilitation, the nature of networks and power relationships, etc. In conversations we want people to be able to speak up, to be respected and understood, to be aware of their effects on others. In networking we want them to be able to find each other, to connect up, to take effective action on whatever it was that moved them to link together, and to learn from each other and their collective experience.

We want effective feedback dynamics that inform, balance, and enhance the health of communities and organizations. We want productive processes for decision-making, collaboration, and self-organization. We want a culture where the power dynamics serve healthy interaction rather than suppressing or distorting voices, information and participation. We want conversations that not only produce quality critiques and analysis, but promote deeper appreciation, connection, and sense of possibility among those who participate and those who observe or hear about the dialogue.

In organizing wisdom-generating conversations, we clearly describe what the participants are being asked to do and how any results will be used. We help every voice be truly heard and every person to feel well heard. We help participants connect with their shared humanity, aliveness, needs,

interests, and circumstances. We help them discern and investigate lies and manipulation, and to engage productively with differences, disturbances, and expressions of emotion that arise among them, as these are often signals alerting them to important underlying dynamics or emerging issues.

We help them creatively move through the actual complexity they face to breakthrough simplicities on "the other side of complexity". We guide them to consider consequences and trade-offs and to seek creative options and perspectives that will minimize negative impacts, now and in the future, and then to develop agreements that become increasingly inclusive as they address people's concerns. The more many people contribute to, engage with, and believe in an outcome, the more likely it will be well implemented and wisely address what needs to be addressed.

We are guided by an appropriate division of expertise: Citizens are experts in community values and everyday on-the-ground experience. Specialists, scholars, researchers and stakeholders are experts in context and in the dynamics, possibilities, and likely consequences related to what's being considered.

As participants work towards a decision, we help them tap the potential resources of hidden assets and positive possibilities. They appraise and creatively engage energies and resources that already exist in the situation or system, tapping the power of people’s aspirations and passions, thereby evoking healthy self-organization. Using methods like Appreciative Inquiry[5] we facilitate appreciative thinking about creative solutions and possibilities, past, present and future.

We engage participation by asking powerful questions that have heart and meaning for them.[6] We elicit crowd-sourced ideas, resources, and engagement from the broad public. We offer incentives, play learning games, engage in productive team competitions and other challenges, instigate fun and community. We encourage collective self-awareness and periodic review of what's been done, and how. To help people explore together and self-organize, we often use Open Space conferences [7] and World Café conversations[8].

Finally, we make sure that conversations continue as part of long-term programs and institutions. We do parallel events and compare them and channel the results of one conversation into subsequent dialogues. A one-time public process can generate a certain amount of participatory wisdom, but doing a similar activity every three months or every year increases the chance that each new iteration will learn from the previous ones and from the real-world effects of earlier recommendations or actions.

Quality interaction is vital for diverse people to process quality information into collective wisdom that can guide their communities or their society.

Quality wisdom

To the extent we engage appropriately diverse, adequately informed people in a free flow of ideas, creativity and resources that take into account interconnectedness and future possibilities, they

will likely generate a good measure of collective wisdom. The individuals themselves don't have to be wise; rather, the context in which they interact needs to help them integrate their individual contributions into a larger insightful, healthy whole. The context can be a conversation, a political system, or an economy – it doesn't matter. To the extent it meets these criteria, it will support the generation of a collective form of wisdom with and within which they all participate.

A dialogue in which all adversaries are well heard opens the door to a resolution that meets all parties' legitimate interests. A political system that combines addressing the concerns of all diverse interests with insight into the long-term common good creates wise public policy. An economy that embeds the environmental and social costs of production and use into the prices of products generates long-term broad benefits – wisdom – through the self-interested acts of consumers seeking "good deals."

There are many factors described here. Anything that enhances our ability to do any of them enhances the level of wisdom we are capable of generating together. Anything that hinders our ability to do any of them hinders the level of wisdom we are capable of generating together.

Participatory economic wisdom

Every day producers, sellers, consumers, citizens, communities, companies, and governments make economic decisions that result in their participating in the collective generation of folly or wisdom.

Under certain economic arrangements economic actors generate folly and under others they generate wisdom. Some of this depends on their individual or corporate awareness and behavior. But much of it depends on the culture and systemic dynamics that shape awareness and behavior.

Among the most important of these meta-factors in generating participatory economic wisdom are real value, healthy feedback, alignment with nature, and the power of peerness.

Participating in real value

The legitimate purpose of economic activity is to meet real human needs. Quite in addition to the unsustainability of a consumption-based growth economy, the shallow and temporary satisfactions provided by such an economy pale in comparison to its harms to human life and natural systems. This unsustainable system persists because the harms are hidden by externalizing the costs – someone else pays for all the corners cut and the damage done – and also by viewing all value through the reductionist lenses of money and quantity, especially in the form of rising profits and GDP.

Real value, in contrast, lies in co-creating the ongoing deep satisfaction of our needs. Most of these needs are more qualitative than quantitative, more tied to the quality of our experience than to our ownership and consumption of stuff and money. Our reduced consumption of stuff – assisted by widespread sharing, sustainable technologies, and simplified lifestyles – dramatically reduces our impacts on nature. When the true costs of products and services are reflected in their prices and when government policies are shaped by quality of life statistics rather than money spent (GDP), we end up together creating real value that deepens our humanity and the health of our communities and our world while providing pleasure and meaning in our lives. This is participatory economic wisdom.

Becoming part of healthy feedback dynamics

To the extent those with power over economic and political decisions – and the rest of us, too – do not feel the effects of such decisions and know where those effects come from, we have little motivation or ability to make corrections. The "learning from experience" feedback loops are broken.

A number of factors can close or tighten up the feedback loops. Transparency – open information – is basic; knowledge is power and is vital when we want to track complex causes through complex systems. The more localized economics (and politics) are, the more easily we can see which activities, organizations, and people are impacting our lives. Cooperative or community ownership also enable – and motivate – us to manage our economic activity more closely. (Not all economic activity can or should be local, but the more it is local, the tighter and healthier the feedback dynamics are likely to be. The principle of *subsidiarity* suggests that functions should be done at the lowest level where they can be effectively carried out.) Finally, a culture of mutuality – of sharing and gifting and helping each other out – increases our responsibility for each other and for sustaining the commons on which we all depend. To the extent these conditions are in place, many economic players will tend to join in reducing or correcting any harms to people and nature.

Aligning human activity with nature

The assumption that we are not part of nature – that nature is simply an "environment" or a stock of resources to be tapped and utilized for our economic activity and profit – is killing us. We are part of and participants in nature and when our participation is toxic, selfish, and oblivious we harm the web of life which sustains us. A culture that assumes we are intimately connected to nature will be more mindful, take greater care, and benefit from partnership with the forces and designs of nature that have been whittled by evolution into profoundly practical life-sustaining wisdom. From

a technological standpoint, we can use nature's designs to solve the problems of meeting human needs, an approach well developed by permaculture and biomimicry and every practice that blends with natural cycles, from hydropower to composting. We can beneficially explore nature's depths and gifts forever if we approach them with the respect and even the reverence due to a power, wisdom, and aliveness that far exceeds our own, which is able to support and protect us to the exact degree we support and protect it. From both practical and spiritual angles, a culture of partnership with nature allows us to embed human economic activity into inherently wise forms of mutually beneficial co-creation.

Co-generating the power of peerness

Peerness is the combination of common interests (or other shared qualities) and power equity. Common interests motivate mutually beneficial participatory activity while power equity reduces obstacles to such activity. Undue concentrations of weakly regulated and unbalanced economic and political power almost always distort the societal playing fields where collective activity takes place and warp the rules that govern participation, undermining collective wisdom through the domination of parasitic self-interest. If power inequity becomes extreme, human, natural, and creative resources of society deteriorate. Alienation and anger fuel crime and rebellion which, especially in our age of increasingly available devastatingly destructive technologies can thoroughly demolish social order and humanity.

In contrast, justice breeds peace and productivity. Opportunities and forums for peer-to-peer connections stimulate self-organized economic activity, from production and commerce to gifting and sharing. In a peer-to-peer context we find natural motivation to give our gifts for the twin rewards of reputation and the well-being of all – both of which provide security – and engage in both cooperation and competition to promote wise participatory outcomes. The culture and benefits of open source software development are increasingly spreading to open source, peer-developed physical production, enabled by the possibilities for shared design and distributed manufacturing offered by the Web, 3D printers, and movements promoting DIY capacity and local food and energy production. In a context of real value, tight feedback loops, and respect for nature, the expansion of such peer-based economics offers long-term benefits for all – which is participatory economic wisdom.

Conclusion

How we organize our interactions – conversational, political and economic – has a profound impact on the amount of wisdom we collectively generate as we go about our individual and communal affairs. Around the world we already see many examples of developments both towards and away from the participatory wisdom we need. There is no simple prescription, but there are many guidelines, possibilities and resources to help us navigate our civilization in wiser, more sustainable

directions.

One way to gain perspective on this is to consider what distinguishes wisdom from folly, and then what factors influence groups of people towards the former and away from the latter. The following table offers one exercise along those lines: Anything we do that furthers any of the factors in the final column promotes participatory wisdom towards sustainability.

FOLLY **comes from**	**WISDOM** **depends on**	**SOME FACTORS SUPPORTING** **this aspect of participatory wisdom**
BIAS Narrow-mindedness Partisanship	**FAIRNESS** Open-mindedness Equity Objectivity	balanced information; attention to "broad benefit" and "general welfare"; equity and balance of power; neutral conveners and facilitators; all voices heard; holistic thinking; attending to deep needs, interests and concerns of all parties; identifying lies and manipulation; legitimate mini-publics / random selection; citizens considered experts on community values; public visibility; transparency of process
IGNORANCE Denial Obliviousness	**KNOWLEDGE** Awareness Insight Understanding	balanced information; access to diverse experts; systems thinking; 21st century info access (online data from peers, open source, crowdsourcing, citizen science); focus on "taking into account what needs to be taken into account"; deliberation; reviewing results; all voices heard; under-standable information; free flow of information; holistic thinking; respect for science; identifying lies and manipula-tion; official transparency and protection for whistleblowers
ARROGANCE Hubris Dogmatism	**RESPONSIVENESS** Humility Judiciousness	focus on learning; listening; integrating multiple viewpoints; iteration; collective intelligence; dialogue; systems thinking; holistic thinking; identifying lies and manipulation; citizens considered experts on community values

SELFISHNESS Thoughtlessness Cold-heartedness Insensitivity	**CARING** Compassion Concern Empathy	attention to "broad benefit" and "general welfare"; hearing each other's stories; attention to deep needs and concerns; all voices heard; triple bottom line; internalized costs; citizens considered experts on community values; support for emotional expression; opportunities to take responsibility for who and what you care about
CARELESSNESS Negligence Rashness	**RESPONSIBILITY** Mindfulness Attentiveness	deliberation; focus on "taking into account what needs to be taken into account"; invocation of citizens to service on behalf of the larger community; triple bottom line; internal-ized costs; transparency; public visibility; opportunities to take responsibility for what you care about; mindfulness meditation; recognition of interconnectedness
SHORTSIGHTEDNESS Immediate gratification Impatience	**PRUDENCE** Foresight Vision	focus on long-term benefit; systems thinking; ecological thinking; scenario work; visioning work; iteration (periodic and ongoing investigations and conversations); internalized costs; triple bottom line; focus on resilience (often contrasted with narrow efficiency); the Precautionary Principle; attention to each other’s concerns
CONVENTION Habit Conformity	**INSPIRATION** Imagination Creativity	choice-creation; moving beyond partisan/traditional boxes; access to spirit; all voices heard; creativity/visioning exercises; listening to multiple viewpoints; using diversity creatively; awareness of assumptions and narratives; supporting self-organization; group "flow"; opportunities to take responsibility for what you care about
CORRUPTION Profiteering Manipulation Adulteration of good process	**INTEGRITY** Trust Faith Dependability Due process	random selection/legitimate mini-publics; ad hoc citizen deliberative councils; supporting self-organization; trans-parency; answerability; identifying lies and manipulation; penalties for corruption; support for whistleblowers; public visibility and broad public engagement; citizen watchdogs; considering multiple viewpoints fairly; citizens considered experts on community values

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