Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter!
(Part IV)

(Constitution Hill, Johannesburg, South Africa)

Part IV: "(Soft) Citizen Skills" - 17 Hacks for everyone

At least since 9/11, it became clear that the certainty of the traditional East-West and North-South divide was over and that also developed countries would face new challenges requiring new solutions. It took our societies a while to accept and digest these new realities. In fact, we are collectively sliding down giant societal "change curves" and are experiencing not-knowing, denial and exaggeration, anger, fear, anxiety… so far, all this was to be expected!

Neo-authoritarian government models seem to offer relief here. In times of acute crises, their fast response times are attractive – especially if one forgets that regimes without a free press

leaders who make it public when they (responsibly) weigh trade-offs and ethical dilemmas are punished by voters. I find this frustrating. Unfortunately, the truth here is stranger than the fiction of "House of Cards" …
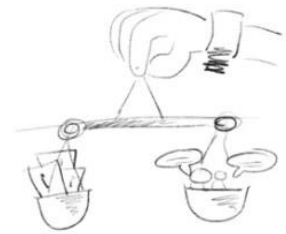
It is up to us citizens to decide what we want. And if we want to immunise our democracy, we must not blame politicians for not guaranteeing certainties they can impossibly deliver. We need to overcome our primitive instincts and take (political) responsibility ourselves. Be it in old or new parties, ad hoc initiatives or simply by being more competent citizens.
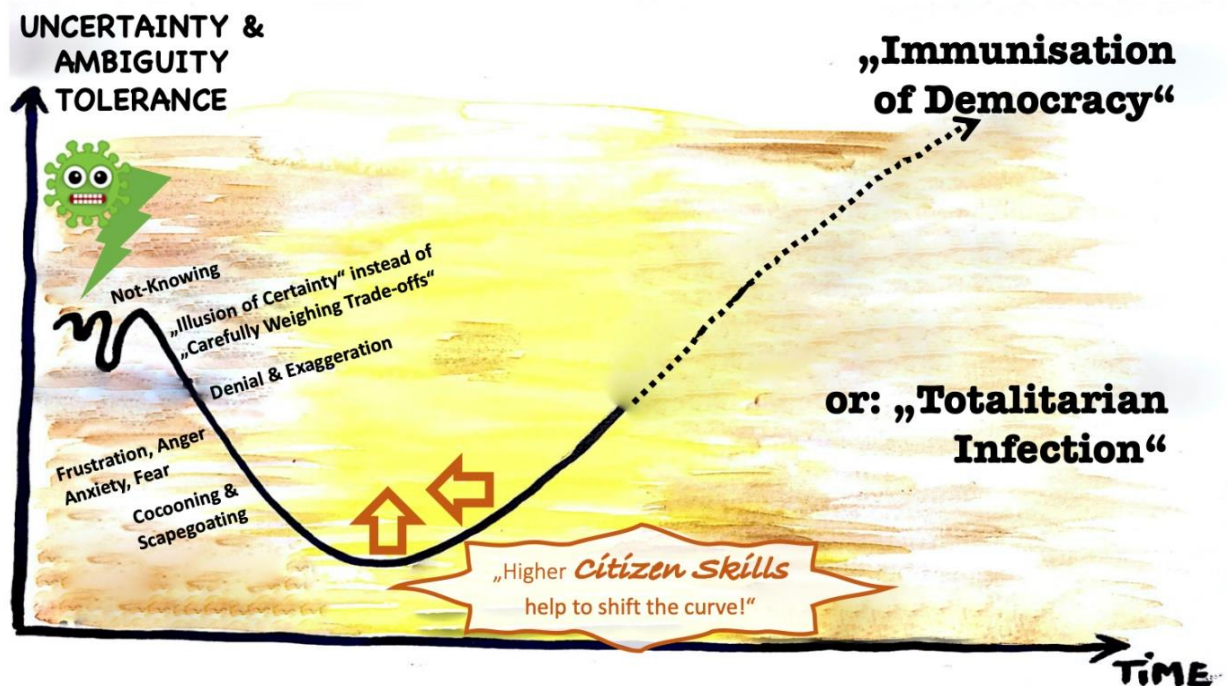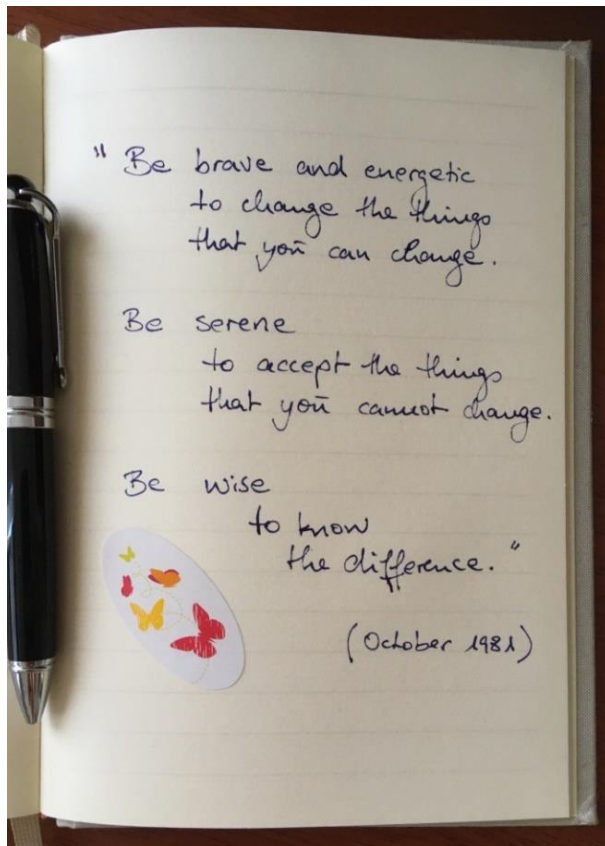

and without annoying opposition (parties) are naturally faster. However, it doesn't need much education to have learned that this speed (and the illusion of clear and unambiguous decisions) not only comes at the expense of reduced civil rights, but totalitarian regimes simply have a disastrous track record of sustainably enabling good life in societies.

Even in our current democracies, leaders who pretend to be heroes are perceived as strong decision-makers whereas other, more candid

Let me summarise: In part 1 of this manifesto, I encouraged you to deliberately and regularly spend time with people who live a live very different from your own. Then, I reminded you of the importance of "hard" and especially of "soft" citizen skills. And in part 3, I promoted dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity as a key competence for citizens in the 2020s.

In this fourth instalment, I want to tackle the toughest challenge: **What can each of us actually do to become a more skilful and competent citizen?**

" Be brave and energetic
to change the things
that you can change.

Be serene
to accept the things
that you cannot change.

Be wise
to know
the difference. "

(October 1981)

Let's begin by remembering what our parents told us when we were young: Stop blaming others! Start with what you can do yourself! And guess what: When I recently found my 1981 "Poesiealbum" (friendship book) which we used to pass around when we were 5th grade classmates, I realised once again that we don't have a lack of knowing and wanting, but of acting. It's like with your "10-minutes-a-day strengthen-the-core" exercises which you know you should do…
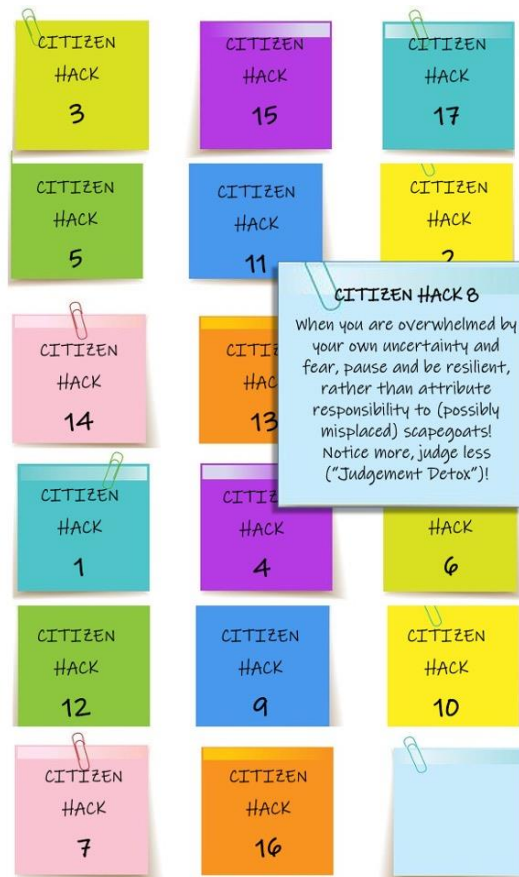

MACHEN IST WIE WOLLEN.
NUR KRASSER!

Therefore, I decided to collect a number of "Citizen Hacks" which may help us to work on our own (soft) citizen skills. Let me be very clear:

(1) These hacks are not brand new (neither are "grandma's household life hacks" on YouTube, but they are still good).

(2) They may not be intellectually impressive (neither are most management innovations which often are as well simple remakes of fundamental "forgotten social techniques").

(3) Therefore, they don't include "hard" citizen skills like "Vote!" or "Inform yourself about the candidates in the next mayoral election".

(4) Many hacks are inconvenient! It is human that we mostly follow more comfortable and more egocentric reflexes which offer a quicker reward. So, changing a pattern might annoy you.

(5) The hacks are partly overlapping (= not mutually exclusive) and certainly not collectively exhaustive. And that is alright! ☺

The first prototype of 12 "citizen hacks" has been complemented by 60 participants of a series of virtual "Mini Salons on Social Sustainability" in an agile process from April to June 2020, before I tweaked them again. Now, there is an updated prototype with currently 17 (!) hacks ready to be tested. They are supposed to be food for thought, something to spur you into action!

As in an advent calendar, I will introduce one "citizen hack" at a time over the next few weeks and illustrate their relevance with examples from both (very personal) "private life" and/or (what I would call) the "professional or political sphere". Please share your comments and post your own examples as to how you train your citizen's muscle – with little stories or short videos… Why not launch a new challenge – as cool and global as the "Ice Bucket Challenge", but one that matters more?

CITIZEN HACK 3

CITIZEN HACK 15

CITIZEN HACK 17

CITIZEN HACK 5

CITIZEN HACK 11

CITIZEN HACK 2

CITIZEN HACK 14

CITIZEN HACK 13

CITIZEN HACK 8
When you are overwhelmed by your own uncertainty and fear, pause and be resilient, rather than attribute responsibility to (possibly misplaced) scapegoats! Notice more, judge less ("Judgement Detox")!

CITIZEN HACK 1

CITIZEN HACK 4

HACK 6

CITIZEN HACK 12

CITIZEN HACK 9

CITIZEN HACK 10

CITIZEN HACK 7

CITIZEN HACK 16

Here's this week's "Citizen Hack":
When you are overwhelmed by your own uncertainty and fear, pause and be resilient, rather than attribute responsibility to (possibly misplaced) scapegoats! Notice more, judge less ("Judgement Detox")!

"Private Life" Example:
Blaming others in order not to feel your pain

As I'm sure you've noticed, I have tried to ignore the COVID-19 situation in my manifesto. The risk of unknowingly using trigger words in an overly emotional public discourse is simply too high. Nevertheless, dealing with uncertainty and fear in the face of a pandemic currently teaches us a great lesson about life in general: When we all struggle, we strive to find a culprit for our misery and happily identify other human beings to take the blame. Let's pause for a minute and work on our resilience: Who of us doesn't make mistakes? Is the mistake really that bad? And is it really true that there was a mistake in the first place? If we all had used these check questions when we heard about the (wrongly accused)

"American super-spreader in Garmisch" instead of immediately asking for severe punishment, we wouldn't have been able to conveniently redirect our attention and negative energies to someone else. I hope that in the future we won't regress that easily to bad habits which remind us of times of mob law.

### "Professional or Political Sphere" Example:
The E.U. as institutional scapegoat

National governments themselves regularly play a nasty "scapegoat game" with E.U. institutions when they claim E.U. successes for themselves and when they blame the E.U. for unpopular decisions – which is even more reprehensible when national governments themselves have actually lobbied for those decisions behind the scenes. Let's just imagine for a moment what would happen if more skilful citizens could unmask such unworthy behaviour and turn the tables: In such circumstances, what would prompt national politicians to act would not be opinion polls or clickbaiting of national tabloids, but skilled and well-informed citizens. The latter would have more realistic expectations towards democratic institutions which would then allow those institutions to transparently engineer better compromises (and decisions).

Of course, populists of all camps are unlikely to appreciate competent citizens: It's like the scapegoat role of referees in modern football and how the video assistant referee (VAR) seems to be a threat for (too) many football fans to not have a readily available culprit to blame. The similarities between political populism and football fan culture are often painfully fascinating.

Hence, stop shifting your own frustrations in life to politicians, to football referees, and to other human beings in general! Instead: Pause for a while before you act (or not)! Notice more, judge less!
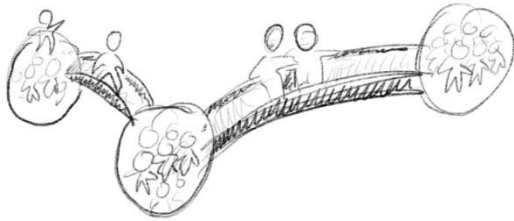
Be a radical citizen and a bridge!

In the different parts of this manifesto, I have shared with you my own coming-of-age as a radical citizen. At least since 2012, I have allocated a third of my working time to not-for-profit activities for social sustainability. In the last years however, I was more and more convinced that I must do more. My own radicalisation as a citizen had come to a point where I decided to enter a public stage more frequently – with all the risks that come with it: Left and right identity politics are ready to attack everyone outside of very small ideological opinion pockets. But who else, I said to myself, who else is independent enough to be able not to be everybody's darling?!

Like everyone else, I sometimes make mistakes and engage in convenience trade-offs. There are even moments when I simply want to refrain from thinking and acting. But I try to do my best. I already simplified my life many years ago: Reduce property and fixed costs to a minimum and lead a virtual lifestyle with an agile and hybrid company set-up. And yes, I am also aware of my countless privileges: Being physically and mentally healthy, having great friends and family, being gifted with some positivity and belief in my self-efficacy. And I feel both old and young enough to fail forward as a citizen whose purpose it is to co-create social innovation by bridging people and ideas that otherwise would not come together! ☺

> *Please share your comments and post your examples of this or the other "citizen hacks" coming in the next weeks – as little stories or short videos… Why not launch a new challenge – as cool and global as the "Ice Bucket Challenge", but one that matters more?*