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Klaus, the PIK and Me

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4.29 Udo Simonis: Klaus, the PIK and Me

The reunification of Germany led to a number of significant scientific innovations accompanied by active collaboration and growing friendship among the scientists involved. In early 1991, the Federal Ministry of Research decided to establish an institute for climate research in Brandenburg under the auspices of the Leibniz Society. The concept for this had been developed by environmentally conscious ministry officials. It was then reviewed by the Science Council in July and—with a significantly reduced scope—recommended for implementation.

The first meeting of a ten-member founding committee (the later Board of Trustees) was held in October 1991, and included Klaus Hasselmann, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology Hamburg (MPI) and Udo E. Simonis, Director of the International Institute for Environment and Society of the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). Some issues were quickly agreed upon: Hasselmann was chosen as chairman of the committee, the residence of the new institute was to be the city of Potsdam, and the special location was to be the Telegraphenberg, which is significant in the history of science. A longer, controversial debate began about other questions: What should the special task of the new institute be, what should it be called, and who should be its director?

The MPI was generally considered the incarnation of environmental knowledge and first address for everything related to climate. Klaus, too, was basically of the opinion that he already knew everything about the climate problem, only that more knowledge needed to be generated about the consequences of climate change for the economy, society, and nature. So, there couldn't just be another traditional institute for climate research; it had to carry out climate impact research, and concern itself with climate policy.

At that time, I had no real idea of the dramatic situation regarding the climate, but I did have some experience with the difficulties of formulating and substantiating consistent international environmental policy: I had coined the term “Weltumweltpolitik” (for world environmental policy) at the WZB. Everybody knows that a person less experienced in the field in question can really annoy the expert in the field, but only a few are aware that he can also animate the expert to learn to think differently. I only had to adjust to the relatively precise natural sciences, but Klaus had to get involved with the diverse, occasionally diffuse social sciences. It became a mutual learning process characterised by an increasing respect for one another and a growing genuine friendship.

This learning process had been facilitated when a ten-member “International Scientific Advisory Board (SAB)” was appointed in February 1994, and I became—and remained for eight years—its chairman. The SAB met frequently and usually drafted very detailed minutes, which the PIK Board of Trustees then had to discuss. A recurring dictum appeared in many of these advisory board minutes: the call for a good balance between the natural and social sciences and interactions between the respective practitioners carried out in good faith.

This permanent demand was based on the insight of the American geographer Gilbert F. White, who had formulated it in anticipation of the Anthropocene era as follows: “The future of the globe’s interlocking natural and social systems might depend more on human behaviour than on the further investigation of natural processes.” Another postulate was also repeatedly called for by the SAB on suitable occasions: “Your work should be theoretically demanding, empirically relevant, and done at the right time”.

Whilst the realisation of the second postulate can be considered to have been accomplished well at the PIK, the first one is a task that remains outstanding. However, much work has been and is being done to address this issue. In addition to important natural scientists, significant social scientists were invited to the institute; in addition to the training of young natural scientists, young social scientists were actively promoted; in addition to men, a particularly large number of women were recruited and, what may well be the most important thing, everyone learned to collaborate constructively and to communicate effectively.

In 1992, the year of its founding, the PIK had just 39 employees, 8 of them in the administration; in 2012, twenty years later, the ratio was 340 to 11—a significant indicator of the institute’s successful development, but also of efficiency of the institute’s administration.

After these 20 years, however, our relationship was by no means at an end. When one’s years of membership in the board of trustees and in the advisory board were over, there was first a proper farewell party with the appointment as “Honorary member of the PIK”. This immediately gave rise to a new idea: when it was time for Klaus and Udo to leave, we needed more external supporters, because a successful institute not only has internal friends, but also external enviers and opponents.

According to German law, seven members are needed to establish an association; they were quickly at hand and so the “Association of Friends and Supporters of the PIK” was founded in 2002. I was elected chairman and Klaus was elected vice-chairman of the association. In the following years, we regularly held annual meetings, organised numerous award ceremonies for

institute staff and ran events to increase public empathy for the institute. We transferred the chairmanship of the association into other hands in 2016.

For both Klaus and me, the following years were years of reflection and relaxation, but also and especially of joy at the birth and development of a “common child” that had become known worldwide in a relatively short period of time—the “Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK)”.