

The Problem

Everyone resists changes to the existing méthode of organization, particularly those proposed by outsiders. This is a classic situation. Those in favor of new approaches see the disadvantages of the old and turn a blind eye to its positive features. Those in favor of continuing the traditional approach consider its faults minor and remediable by gradual improvement, whilst remaining skeptic toward the need for any fundamentally new departures. Perhaps this awkward situation can be bypassed in the case of the needs of the NGOs.

Safeguarding the status quo

Let all the existing NGO conferences, secretariats, and bureaus and working parties remain as they are, grouping those organizations which currently attend them. No changes at all are made, so that no one need fear that things are being reorganized with unpredictable results :

- each organization is involved as before, no more and no less, in NGO groupings and their committees
- each representative plays his usual role

The existing mechanism is therefore safeguarded to the satisfaction of those who think the status quo is satisfactory.

The problem is therefore to satisfy those who are arguing for the new methods of operation.

Approach

Suppose that all NGOs, whether in consultative status or not, with a particular agency, are now approached so that :

- a) those willing to collaborate would agree to the following only :
- that their organization's name should be placed on a mailing list
 - that they would either
 - ii) Send in to a central secretariat (*), periodically, the topics in which they were interested, or
 - ii) Answer a standard questionnaire, periodically, identifying the topics in which they were interested
 - that the central secrétaireit would sort the replies and prepare a combined list of all NGOs interested in a particular topic, and periodically send updated copies of such lists to the NGOs in question
- b) those not willing to collaborate but do not object to the following only :
- that their organization's name should be placed on a mailing list

(*) Possibly a commercial secretarial service, if no agreement can be reached on the use of an NGO cooperative or on some operation via any particular NGO's secretariat.

- that periodically the central secretariat would update the topics in which it was thought the NGO was interested
- that the central secretariat would sort the replies, prepare combined lists of all NGOs interested in a particular topic and periodically send updated copies of such lists to the NGOs in question

Note that no NGO receiving these lists or sending information to the central secretariat need « recognize » the secretariat or the « potential association », or any other NGO associated with the potential association. (N.B. - For a description of the « potential association » technique, see New types of social entity; the role of the potential association. International Associations, 23, 1971, 3, p. 148-152.

On the basis of the combined resources of the NGOs currently interested in a given topic, the NGOs in question could arrange by their own independent initiative transient activities of the following type :

- Either — meet together on that topic
- create a working party on that topic
- create a joint conference on that topic
- Or — any other form of appropriate joint action (e.g., a letter, delegation, etc.)

Note that no NGO need recognize any NGO not involved in the given transient joint activity in which it is interested — and of course is in no way obliged to respond to any particular initiative from one of the interested NGOs.

Inherent flexibility

Now the existing NGO joint conferences, committees, secretariats, can be conceived as being structures which have already gelled or crystallized out of the potential association, around particular topics of interest with different degrees of formality and permanence.

But by using the flexibility inherent in the potential association concept, those NGOs involved in any of the existing structures could together, quite independently and where appropriate, and of their own initiative, decide to « dissolve » that particular structure into the potential association, and recrystallize a slightly different structure or simply to create new structures in parallel. The potential association concept facilitates this, and provides such actions with a conceptual and information framework for any such change.

With respect to the UN system and the consultative status mechanism, some new structures which might each be crystallized out at some future date, when appropriate, only for as long as is necessary (i.e., either once only, periodically, or as a permanent structure) are as follows :

- Plenary conferences of all NGOs interested in the UN system program (i.e., not necessarily consultative status NGOs)
- Agency-oriented conferences of -NGOs interested in the programs of one agency only
- Plenary conferences of all NGOs with consultative status with the UN system
- Agency-oriented conferences for NGOs concerned with consultative status procedure with one particular agency

Examples of the different types of existing, permanent and semi-permanent, joint NGO structures are based upon :

- consultative status (international)
 - UNESCO (the Conference of International NGOs approved for Consultative Status with UNESCO; the Standing I Committee)
 - ECOSOC (Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status I with ECOSOC)
 - UNICEF (Nongovernmental Organizations Committee on UNICEF)
- consultative status (regional or city-based)
 - ECOSOC (Geneva Bureau, New York Bureau)
- consultative status (regional or city based and specialized)
 - FAO (Conference of International Organizations for Joint Study of Activities Planned in the Field of Agriculture in Europe: its Liaison Center: its working parties)
 - ECOSOC (Conference's Geneva Working Party)
 - UNESCO (Paris and London-based working parties)
 - UNICEF (Ad Hoc Committee)
 - UNICEF (Ad Hoc Committee)
 - South-East Asia Freedom from Hunger Campaign Conference
- non-UN consultative status
 - Seminar of Council of Europe NGOs
- national NGO conferences
 - American Council of Learned Societies
 - Standing Conference of British Organizations for Aid to Refugees
- substantive matter independent of IGO-agency programmes (international)
 - International Council of Voluntary Agencies
 - International Conference of Womens NGOs
 - Round Table of NGOs interested in Problems of Childhood and Adolescence
 - International Council of Scientific Unions
 - Union of International Engineering Organizations
 - Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences
 - CIPHS
 - Meeting of Specialized Agencies and NGOs interested in the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders
 - Meeting of Representatives of International Organizations interested in Peace
 - Conference of Latin American Voluntary Agencies
 - Conference of World Organizations Interested in the Handicapped
 - etc. (there are some 60 international NGO groupings of various types; there are many other periodical or irregular NGO joint meetings)
- continental NGO conferences
 - Conference of African NGOs
- country-oriented NGO conferences
 - Federation of International Associations Established in Belgium
- city-oriented NGO conferences
 - Federation of Semi-Official and Private International Institutions Established in Geneva

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- Agency-oriented conferences of consultative status NGOs concerned with a particular substantive-question
- Commissions, specialized conferences, or working parties on particular substantive matters
- Committees for any of the above conferences or working parties
- Secretariats for any of the above structures

Possible new structures

Any of the above structures could be rapidly crystallized out of the potential association as the problem situation demanded. The stress should, however, be placed not on the joint NGO-NGO or NGO-IGO organizations existing at any particular point in time, but rather on the ability to switch flexibly to other patterns of NGO-NGO or NGO-IGO organization as new problems, crises and opportunities arose. These new coordinating or joint bodies might take any of the following forms :

- Plenary conferences of NGOs
- Specialized conferences, missions or working parties
 - By region
 - By country
 - By subject
 - By procedure
 - By agency
- Combinations of the above structures
 - Regional and specialized by subject
 - Regional by agency program
 - Procedural by agency (e.g., consultative status)
 - International NGO conferences concerned with the coordination of their activities in a particular country
 - National plenary conferences of NGOs
- Secretariats corresponding to conferences or committees

The ideal would be to reach a peak of flexibility at which :
 _ organizations were only created as continuing bodies where there was a real, continuing problem
 _ the joint bodies created were neither too universal nor too narrow in geographical spread, nor too general nor too specialised in substantive matter focus

The goal is to have two joint bodies where the division of interests within an existing body warrants this, or conversely to create one joint body where the overlap of interests between two existing bodies is sufficiently high. The intention should, however, be to facilitate rapid links to both

greater subdivision and greater coordination as each problem requires new responses. Loyalty should not be to a fixed pattern of joint activity, but to the most effective new pattern for each new crisis — namely to the pattern-forming potential.

— Joint activities were neither too over-organized and formal; or too under-organized and insufficiently coordinated

Namely the goal is to have organizations and permanent committees where such are needed, regular meetings only where such are sufficient, and irregular meetings or ad hoc committees when this is all that is necessary. The intention should, however, be to facilitate the rapid changes between one formula and another, to ensure the best possible response, with the least waste of effort in response to each new change in the problem's phases.

Significance of proposal

A very important feature of this technique is that the multitude of joint conferences organized according to subject, regional, or procedural interests, or geographical location of offices, is then recognized to be the most appropriate response to the

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Inter-Agency Coordinating Board are currently looking for new mechanisms via which to improve the UN's contacts with NGOs, to increase the effectiveness of their action during the Second Development Decade. Country-level information is a U.N. priority. What are the NGO priorities? What proposals should be put forward by NGOs's current investigation of the consultative relationship mechanism? What independent action should NGOs take? These are some of the points to be discussed at the Milan Seminar (May 17-19, 1972) of the Union of International Associations.

need, for contact at that particular point in time. Through the potential association mechanism, attention is constantly drawn to the possibility of other

— more general conferences (whether in terms of geographical, subject, or multi-agency criteria)

— more specialized joint activities of interest to a very limited group of NGOs

as soon as the common interest warrants their creation. Any of these might prove to be a more appropriate response at a later point in time. In this way, cumbersome plenary conferences need only be used when essential.

The potential association mechanism is therefore one which keeps the NGO organizational resources in a state of preparedness for any form of combined activity — for which the most appropriate combination of organizations cannot be predicted. In this connection, note the importance of this technique for response to crisis — whether procedural or natural. NGO interaction is therefore maintained at a maximum consistent with the desires and interests of the « potential associates » — hopefully this will evolve with the flexible assistance of the potential association mechanism to more and more fruitful forms of NGO-NGO and NGO-IGO activity. The potential association mechanism does not involve any form of - recognition » at the stage when information is exchanged by « potential associates » with the central Secretariat. There is, therefore, no reason why intergovernmental bodies, UN agencies, or any individual agency departments should not be held on the mailing lists as potential « associates » — unilaterally recognized as such by the central Secretariat. In this way, on a given program topic — whether of governmental or non-governmental origin — the exchange of information may lead to the crystallization of one of many forms of joint NGO-IGO activity in a particular case. The potential association mechanism, therefore, constantly draws attention to new forms of inter-organizational joint activity (irrespective of whether NGO-NGO or NGO-IGO, or even IGO-IGO). Hopefully, this will evolve over time into collaboration of greater and greater effectiveness.

Country-level and IGOs

There are two additional features of the potential association mechanism :

a) Just as individual NGOs and their objectives do not benefit in the long run from an isolationist strategy, so the effectiveness of the totality of the NGOs will be severely threatened unless the improvement of their own mechanism is meshed with that of the national NGO mechanisms which are the base and justification for international activity. In this context, two types of national NGO mechanisms may be distinguished

i) Developed countries : in which the national NGO coordinative mechanism is more integrated, powerful, and effective than the international equivalent. In this case it is important to mesh national and international to increase the amount of international activity by encouraging extension of the local and national activity onto the international level (and into developing countries where applicable). In this way, the international mechanism is invigorated.

ii) Developing countries : in which the national NGO coordinative mechanism may be weak to nonexistent — and in which non-governmental organizations may be an unrecognized or even suspect phenomena; or may even blur into governmental activity. In this case, it is important to make the international mechanism relevant to such countries by

— facilitating the initiation and implementation of country-level programs in response to requests from the countries concerned

— catalyzing the creation of national coordinating mechanisms and their interaction with international bodies and the equivalent activities in other countries

In this way the international mechanism is constantly faced with the Third World's problems.

b) In a similar manner, it is insufficient for NGOs to be satisfied that NGO-NGO and NGO-IGO, and NGO-national interaction mechanisms are satisfactory. Any NGO-oriented mechanism must be structured to mesh with IGO-IGO information systems, particularly in the UN system, as they are created. Such information systems, once launched, are liable to develop much more quickly — if more inflexibly — than NGO mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is vital that NGOs systems should be in a position to interact with IGO

systems.