



LEVELS OF DISCOURSE

This issue, and those to follow, contain further material prepared for the UAI/SIOI Seminar in Milan (May 1972) on the philosophy and functioning of nongovernmental organizations. But what did the highly qualified participants from INGOs, IGOs, foundations and academia achieve or hope to achieve at this first meeting? As a further partial answer to this question let us look at some possible levels of discourse of concern to nongovernmental organization action.

Level 1 : Charge and counter-charge. Those active in the NGO world since 1946 have been exposed repeatedly to situations in which specific charges, whether political or nonpolitical, are made against specific organizations in the international community. These have set up cycles of charge and counter-charge which have proliferated ad nauseam, alienating many concerned activists and offering no framework for profitable discourse.

Level 2 : Issue-oriented complaints. Some of the complaints from level 1 have been grouped in connection with major political issues before the United Nations. Thus there have been complaints and counter-complaints concerning the operations and effectiveness of NGOs and IGOs with respect ~ to human rights, youth, peace, racism, etc... and now development and the environment. It is at this level of discourse that we see the current ECOSOC reflections on the contribution of consultative status NGOs to the development process. Resolution 1580 (L) provides the framework for some re-examination which could possibly lead to an overall improvement in the functioning of the international community of organizations. Curt is Roosevelt, Chief of the ECOSOC NGO Section, is certainly doing all in his power to bring this about.

The recent NGO Hearings before the ECOSOC Committee on Nongovernmental Organizations (Geneva, 3-4 July 1972) provided a major occasion for discourse at this level. As a participating representative however, it required much optimism to see any light at the end of the tunnel. Only rarely was there a full quorum of governmental representatives, their lack of interest and instructions was evident, and had it not been for the Ghanaian President and the United Kingdom Delegate, NGOs would have been heard in an echoing silence. On the NGO side, most speakers were forced to use the very limited time in a manner which turned dialogue into monologue — petitioners frantically trying to justify their causes to impatient feudal barons. One ray of hope came from the UK Delegate's statement that ECOSOC should « cut the waffle and act » — quickly dashed by the qualification that he had had « no instructions on this matter ». The next meeting may indeed be better.

Level 3 : Consultation complaints. At a higher level of generality, there have been calls for re-examination of current consultative relationship procedures between UN bodies and NGOs, aside from the question of any particular political issues. These calls have emerged separately from some of the groups of NGOs linked to different IGOs.

Level 4 : Inter-organization cooperation problems. The above levels of discourse were not a prime concern at Milan, although points at each level did emerge. Attention was given, in the first instance, to the general problems and possibilities of cooperation between similar common-interest organizations in the transnational network. One question examined was how a

network of independent organizations could mesh their programmes together (or maximum effectiveness without affecting their autonomy — in other words, *not* the external coordination of a group of organizations, but the common information system which would permit a network of organizations to be self-coordinating. Coordinative organizations could increasingly be replaced by information systems which facilitate auto-coordination and the emergence of a greater number of ad hoc bodies. This would help to avoid the unnecessary inter-organizational antagonism which currently paralyzes the system of NGOs and IGOs.

Level 5 : Inter-sectoral cooperation problems. Further problems and possibilities arise with respect to cooperation between organizations from different sectors within the network (inter-governmental, nongovernmental, business, research, etc) even though their interests may be related, whether directly or indirectly. It is within contexts defined at this level that the *variety of possible consultative procedures* which could emerge in the light of new interpretations of Article 71 were examined for the particular case of IGO-NGO relationships. Other intersectoral relationships were also considered at Milan however. The views of scholars on this matter were of particular value.

Level 6 : Adequacy of existing structures. The above levels of discourse do not permit any questioning of the adequacy of existing forms of organization to meet today's problems. Criticism and recommendations for change only cover the procedures by which such *existing* organizations interact. At this level, however, *alternative* or emerging forms of organization could also be considered. It is within such a framework that the adequacy of any given existing type can be assessed. On

these points, note the views of Donald Schon (International Associations, 1971, 3) that many organizations and programmes (whether governmental or nongovernmental) are, in their present form, merely « memorials to old problems ». The system of organizations is out of phase with the reality of the problems that people think are worth solving. Means of facilitating rapid organizational change are required.

Level 7 : Nature of world problems. The previous levels presuppose that the many politically defined issues constitute the real problems which need to be attacked. These problems are however also social artefacts which change their significance and interrelationships depending on the values against which the importance of each is assessed. The complex question of how organizations and programmes emerge and evolve as mediating social structures between values and problems could not however be considered in the time available at Milan.

The *raison d'être* of the Milan Seminar was to open up a dialogue at the higher levels of discourse in order to help provide a conceptual framework for dialogue at the lower levels of generality.

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* The map of organizations or agencies that make up the society is, as it were, a sort of clear overlay against a page underneath it which represents the reality of the society. And the overlay is always out of phase in relation to what's underneath : at any given time there's always a mis-match between the organisational map and the reality of the problems that people think are worth solving... There's basically no social problem such that one can identify and control within a single system all the elements required in order to attack that problem. The result is that one is thrown back on the knitting together of elements in networks which are not controlled and where the network functions and the network roles become critical. »
(Donald Schon. What can we know about social change ?)