

Inter-Organizational Relationships

in search of a new style

In this issue of *International Associations* we record : the sterile failure of the first «World Assembly of NGOs concerned with the Global Environment » (page 414); the evident weakness in the United Nations attempt to communicate outside its own private world (page 407); and the contradictory developments toward a new UN-NGO relationship (page 421). These pages make depressing reading and recall our attempt to summarize the current state of affairs in 1971 (1). What options for fruitful future inter-organizational action remain open ? Is there any hope for a « new style » at the international level ?

Guidelines (**)

Our failures in the past suggest the following criteria or guidelines for the future :

1. Major restructuring of existing inter-organizational relations will apparently not be feasible until catalyzed by the next major social crisis (so proposals for change should concentrate on - relations *between* organizations and not on changes to organizations).

2. Concentration of organizational resources is desirable but cannot be achieved by centralized coordination of organization (unless the alienation of many potential collaborators is acceptable).

Informational links should be substituted wherever possible for organizational links (since the latter tend to become clogged by personality, procedural and status problems).

4. Participative involvement in programme formulation should replace mobilized support for programme execution (to avoid the alienation noted on page 407-412).

5. Organizational flexibility should replace organizational rigidity (to permit more rapid response to new action opportunities and to permit new organizational configurations to emerge quickly wherever required).

6. Social realities should be considered more important than legal and administration fictions (to permit greater response to action-oriented commitment as opposed to status oriented procedures).

7. Meetings of NGO representatives should not be structured to favour consensus formation in plenary, since it is only very rarely that delegates come with a mandate to commit the NGO to any course of *action* (and most of the other reasons for voting are purely *symbolic* and a waste of meeting time).

Selected Options

Some of the following are fairly straightforward; others are more complex. Some could be rapidly elaborated in detail, others would require detailed discussion and possibly experiment. What we need now however is a pool of ideas from which to select options to get us out of the inter-organizational swamp into which we are sinking more rapidly every day. The following represents one organization's offering to this pool.

1. Meeting Style

When representatives of NGO's meet collectively today, they choose a standard set of procedures and a setting which has proved basically unfruitful for the past 20 years. For the pattern has not changed over that time — despite a multitude of imaginative changes in other spheres. The pattern is unfruitful in that it only gives rise to resolutions, declarations and committees and only in a small number of cases to action — and then only between bodies with strongly overlapping interests which would have probably worked together anyway. In an earlier issue of *International Associations* we put forward a proposal for a new style of meeting which would be more flexible, creative and dynamic (2). Briefly the proposal was 10 arrange for regular meetings of *independent* series of NGO Conferences (which have strongly overlapping memberships) to be held at the *same place* (although possibly in different countries each year) during the *same time period*, instead of being held at different places at different times (3). In other words, without in any way linking them together *procedurally*, it would be quite possible to hold the

(*) This article is an abridged and modified version of the last part of the final report of the Union of International Associations' Seminar on the Philosophy and Functioning of International Nongovernmental Organization. (Milan, May 1972). (Forthcoming in the *UAI documents series*.)

(**) A more extensive set of guidelines is given in : « Principles of transnational action; an attempt at a set of guidelines ». *International Associations*, 1973, 3, p. 138-144.

sessions and group meetings of different Conferences in the same physical complex of buildings, in the same way that group meetings for one Conference are currently arranged (e.g. in neighbouring rooms with common reception and refreshment areas). The resulting « multi-meeting » maximizes the amount of informal contact which is now recognized to be the principal advantage of large Conferences, whilst providing the occasion for a very wide variety of conventional (and if necessary, highly formal), informational and action-oriented sessions. It also provides the setting for new groups to be formed as clusters of NGOs find they have a common interest. Such sessions may be either formal groups of one conference (possibly with participants from another), joint sessions of several Conferences, or private independent sessions of groups of NGOs which feel they have interests in common.

The disastrous experience of the UNEP-supported first World Assembly of NGOs concerned with the Global Environment suggests the need for some dramatic changes if it is to be worthwhile attending the second Assembly in Nairobi (Spring 1974) — and if the « Spirit of Stockholm » is to survive. To give precision to a proposal for a (new style meeting (4) we are printing here (page 400) an open letter addressed by us to Maurice Strong, Executive Director of UNEP, as being one of the few people with the influence and openness to be able to catalyze its conception — and with the opportunity of Nairobi (Spring 1974) to catalyze its implementation in a manner which could launch such a new approach with some hope of influencing other NGO Conferences to follow suit, perhaps together, in some such multi-meeting format as outlined above.

2. Shared Facilities (5)

Whether in capital cities of developing or developed countries, the offices of international non-governmental organizations are usually scattered so that face-to-face contact between organization staff members is infrequent. Organizations are often poorly housed and equipped. A « critical mass » is not built up.

In some cities, notably New York, Geneva and Paris, some organizations are grouped together within the same office building. They may or may not share facilities such as a conference room, restaurant, receptionist, library, etc. This formula is however very suggestive as a model for the future. There seems to be a strong case for encouraging the construction of such « transnational centres » and for developing the administrative techniques for sharing certain facilities and equipment in an economically viable manner.

It is interesting to note that a five page

« Proposal concerning the establishment of a non-governmental organizations service centre » in Nairobi was made at the NGO Geneva Assembly, although it was not debated. The range of formulae for such transnational centres needs examination to determine the conditions under which each is most appropriate. Their great advantage is that such centres ensure that there is a concentration of internationally oriented expertise in major cities — a « critical mass » of people whose interaction generates new programme concepts and acts as a magnet for uncommitted resources. As in the case of multi-meetings, no formal relationship is imposed on organizations sharing office facilities. Informal contact is however maximized so that fruitful working relationships can emerge as and when appropriate. They offer a means of bringing together in the physical environment, without formal organizational links, an exciting variety of other organizations, from UN Information Offices, through institutes of international relations, to temporary bodies required to focus or mobilize resources in time of disaster. They permit the shared use by all of a much wider variety of services, from sophisticated office machinery, through professional services (translation, accountants, etc.), to letter boxes for organizations without need of a permanent office.

3. Information and Communication
The needs, possibilities and dangers in this area have been discussed a number of times in earlier issues of International Associations. Suffice it to say that computer systems should be participative that is, those NGOs registered in the systems, particularly if governmental, should also be permitted to use them to facilitate their own programme activity.

4. New Styles of Organization
The fragmentation, suspicion, duplication, unnecessary competition for limited resources and conscious or unconscious opposition to change and new patterns of activity which are increasingly characteristic of interorganizational relations, suggest the need for a new type of social entity. Federations of organizations or even groupings of individuals — as the current solution to this malaise — are considered a potential threat to the autonomy and freedom of action of the proposed members, unless the grouping has a highly specific function (in which case its coordinative power is limited). Members do not want to have things said in their name except on very specific issues with their approval.

Is it not time for a re-examination of the assumption that « organizations » as now known — and they do not differ fundamentally from the first associations and limited liability companies

that were created centuries ago — are the only possible form of organizing social activity. This is an incredible absence of development in a society characterized by change in all domains.

A proposal along these lines was made in an earlier issue of International Associations (6). Briefly the suggestion is to use computer systems to facilitate the rapid formation and dissolution of new configurations of organizations in the light of immediate needs — a form of institutionalized « ad hocery ». The justification for this is clarified in the two tables (pages 402-403) which show the evolution of organizational characteristics from the traditional to the network style required by complex, turbulent, problem networks (7). The challenge is to give greater operational meaning to the network mode of operation.

5. Changes in Intergovernmental Secretariats

At the present time there is insufficient consensus for any major interorganizational structural change to be implemented to facilitate nongovernmental action. This applies particularly to the relations between bodies within the United Nations system, whether:

- within different divisions of a particular Secretariat (e.g. Office of Public Information or NGO Liaison Section)
- between bodies reporting to the UN General Assembly (e.g. ECOSOC and UNDP)
- between bodies reporting to different plenary bodies, despite ECOSOC's mandate to review such relationships (e.g. FAO and UNESCO). The probability of implementing any of the following suggestions within an intergovernmental secretariat is there fore inversely proportional to the number of bodies from which approval must be sought. It is useful to list some of them, even if they cannot be implemented, as a possible guide to thinking for the none-too-distant future when international complacency will be severely challenged by economic and social realities:

1. Facilitation of NGO Action

- perform a switchboard function for incoming programme proposals from NGOs
- assist NGOs in matching their projects to responsibilities of agency divisions (particularly for cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary projects)

2. Programme Information

- arrange for inclusion of NGOs on all (of the many) appropriate agency mailing lists for document distribution and periodically review the distribution profile for each NGO. Suggest document « formulae » and « packages » to be purchased by NGOs

Open letter to: 1973

July,

- receive and file a periodic report from NGOs on their activities particularly as they relate to UN programmes
- operate information system to facilitate inter-NGO and NGO-UN section contact on specific programme interests in common (see : previous sections)
- provide briefing papers for staff and delegates (especially for newly elected delegates on committees), new delegates on NGOs and for new NGO representatives on UN procedures
- ensure involvement of NGOs both as data and as users of that data (particularly in studies formulated by the Inter-Organization Board for Information Systems and Related Activities)
- 3. Facilitation of Inter-NGO Contact
 - formulate models of international centres to house the offices of a wide variety of UN and NGO bodies having programmes in a particular (developing) country (see : earlier section) with the object of building up a « critical mass » of competence in each country.
- 4. Public Relations Activities on Behalf of NGOs
 - undertake public relations function about NGO possible role in relation to the UN (not only to international NGOs, but also to governments, agency secretariats, informed publics (e.g. via Unesco Courier) and national NGOs)
 - publication of one single NGO newsletter for UN family
 - ensure NGOs figure in public relations concerning UN (e.g. UN and agency tours : UN bookshop, etc.)
 - arrange for meetings in developing countries to introduce and explain the role of NGOs and examine their possible function and style in given circumstances
 - help to build recognition of voluntary and NGO groups as constituting a « Third World » in organizational terms when related to the governmental and business organization worlds — a Third World which needs to be developed for balanced social change.
- 5. Studies
 - further, whenever possible and appropriate, the moves to create an international legal status for NGOs as examined by UNESCO and Council of Europe (see bibliography in 14th edition of Yearbook of International Organizations)
 - arrange for specialist meetings and studies to clarify questions such as
 - definitions of range of NGOs
 - nature of « NGO » in non-Western cultures
 - new types of organization possible
 - the existence of NGOs as an indicator of social development

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Dear Sir

Proposal for a Significant Assembly of NGOs's

I am writing to you on behalf of a small group of international NGO executives who have just returned from a meeting of two hundred persons from all parts of the world - namely, the first Assembly of NGOs concerned with the Global Environment. On the way back home we began talking about the effectiveness of such events. Some of us attend NGO meetings like this regularly and we are questioning their value. This last conference on the environmental issue was just as sterile as previous ones in spite of hopes that we could start afresh. One sees the same, faces, only at different meeting sites; one hears the same positions defended and one sits, in the same hotel or conference room. Somehow we must find another process for: such international gatherings.

As we talked on the way home we agreed that such meetings of 100-200 NGO representatives (assembled at rusts estimated up to \$ 100,000) are like eight cylinder engines running on only two cylinders. We estimated that 85 % of the group listened while 15 % spoke. Not only is this an extremely inefficient use of human resources, it means that many travelled all this way without ever having the opportunity to express their needs and ideas. The more aggressive persons, those speaking the conference language fluently, the « conference pro's », still dominate these events. Frankly, we feel such meetings are often oppressive.

It occurred to us that most advanced techniques were used to bring this Assembly together (jet planes, telex messages, computerized hotel reservation systems, etc.) but very, archaic methods were used in the meetings themselves. There were still the speeches, plenary sessions and poorly organized smaller work groups. As we discussed what could be done it occurred to us that the solutions may already exist because there are some moments in such conferences when things suddenly begin to happen. We noted a few of these :

1. When people begin to talk about, specific situations and bring the discussion down to earth you can literally see the group wake up.
2. Toward the end, of one conference people discovered by accident others sharing their same interests and used the coffee breaks-or even boycotted the sessions to meet together. (This of course frustrated the chairman who considered them traitors.)
3. Late one night in another conference a small group listened to some tapes one of the participants had brought along on a grass-roots project sponsored by his NGO to catalyze small discussion-action, groups. It turned out to-be the high point of the entire conference — even though this item was nowhere on the agenda.

4. On those occasions when the discussion shifted from existing obstacles to future action possibilities it generated a quite different mood.

5. In small groups we noted that at the end we were somewhat frustrated in making concrete plans because we were not viable action groups, i.e. we did not as a group represent a specific organization, region or local situation in which some specific plans could be formulated. All we could do was propose generalities — and such generalities don't help anyone anymore.

Therefore, on the basis of these observations we would like to make a proposal to you for the second Assembly of NGOs concerned with the Global Environment. Since you have expressed interest in innovative ideas to catalyze NGO activity we would like you to consider the following plan. Why not stimulate the organization of a conference that facilitates those things which occur by accident and in spite of the set agenda? In other words, why not approach the planning with the major priority on how to help the NGO participants-share their particular concerns and find specific resources for their needs? Is it possible for the Assembly to have no agenda except to enable the participants to deal with their diverse agendas?

Now, we realize that our proposal is a disaster for those NGO's representatives who want a rigid, controlled, and inflexible programme. Our plan turns things upside down — but we believe this proposal fulfills, far better than anything we have seen till now, the basic purpose of unleashing the resources of the NGOs for action oriented environmental programmes. How can we help NGO's find what they, are looking for so that they leave the Assembly excited and hopeful in returning to their respective tasks ? That is our challenge.

Our idea would be for a similar pro environmental Assembly to set their specific needs. But to be specific, let's take the case of the World Conference on Environment and Development in Nairobi. First of all the delegate, Levy, set tables or rigid rows of chairs but by (see Fig. 1)

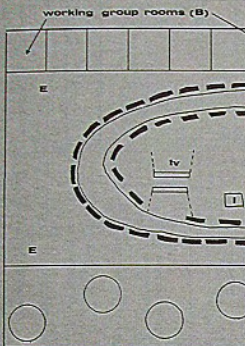


Figure 1

Ndaro has the following options :

1. He can take a stroll along the path where the projects are shown (A) and the projects. (For example : small group discussions, social issue programmes, academic programmes, extension education, leadership training, film making, etc.) NGOs might have a display to let the delegates know what they do. Ndaro may find seven or eight information shops, briefing or resolution form meeting rooms (B). Clearly different options wish to use this approach to inform and techniques).
2. He may also choose to attend a television interview on one of the four TV screens (C) where a UNEP resource person are carried so that in the background one can hear the interview.
3. Ndaro may also raise questions with the delegates in the corners (E).
4. He may also choose to watch certain programmes and again from the corners (E).
5. Ndaro may want to visit more information shops in the side walk cafe (G).
6. He may want to meet with a particular delegate by going to the information shop over the loud speaker and projects.
7. Auxiliary rooms outside the hall for different types of meetings to supplement the main hall. (Note, this does not prevent those delegates from formal group session or using the auxiliary rooms.)

You may wonder at this arrangement. A similar arrangement has already been organized in 1971 and 1972 after much analysis. It has been told that on these occasions people discover resources back in their own countries and linkage of these local resources with

6. Liaison with National Governments to Facilitate NGO Action

- assist NGOs with specific problems with national governments
- encourage the formulation of model laws relating to the establishment and functioning of NGO offices and programmes in a particular country; give consideration to the legal status of NGO staff in a given country (c.f. special status of journalists)
- encourage formulation of models of ways NGOs can relate to national governments within different social systems (including national level consultative status)

7. Liaison with other Intergovernmental Bodies to Facilitate NGO action

- liaise with consultative status offices in all bodies of the United Nations system
- undertake Ombudsman function for suggestions and complaints
- provide a « counsel for the defence » in any review of a given NGO's status
- defend NGO subventions when these are threatened in budget revisions; propose and negotiate new subventions where these seem appropriate
- act as funding agency for special NGO projects which cannot be handled by other parts of the UN system
- perform a watchdog function to ensure that NGOs are drawn into programme and information system planning in time whenever possible and that NGOs are « called upon » in resolutions whenever appropriate
- negotiate provision for NGO facilities in each agency on a basis similar to those of press correspondents
- liaise with regional UN bodies concerning their contacts with NGOs
- standardize NGO consultative status categories and review procedure between agencies. Introduce the concept of third and fourth level categories of a « contact but non-consultative » variety in order to bring more bodies into relationship with the UN

6. Legal Recognition

It is important to keep drawing attention to the fact that international non-governmental organizations have no existence in the eyes of international law (whether they are profit or non-profit organizations). Legally such organizations are « out-laws » subject in their operations to the whims of the legislation of the country in which they are based or in which they attempt to undertake programmes. An early important step taken by The Hague Conference on Private International Law resulted in the adoption

in 1956 of a Convention concerning the legal recognition of societies, associations and foreign foundations. This has only been ratified by five of the Conference's Member States. In addition it only covers the recognition, not the activity of such bodies. The Union of International Associations, after consultation with appropriate experts, submitted to the Director General of Unesco in May 1959 a text for a « Draft Convention aiming at facilitating the work of International Nongovernmental Organizations ». This only resulted in some changes to customs regulations governing the movement of NGO goods. Some studies have since been undertaken by FAO resulting in an investigation in 1969 by the Council of Europe with a view to the preparation of a European convention, since abandoned. Recent parallel events include work within the European community to formulate legislation for a « European (profit-making) corporation ». Although a convention for NGOs would have many positive consequences, it is not clear whether the negative consequences of an overly rigid or discriminating convention would not cause more harm than benefit. The experience of Belgium should be studied. It is still the only country to have special legislation giving favourable recognition and facilities to international scientific bodies (law of 25 October 1919) later expanded (law

of 6 December 1954) to benefit philanthropic, religious, educational and other bodies.

A related important problem is that of the legal rights and obligations of staff of international nongovernmental bodies — particularly with respect to travel documents, residential requirements, taxation, social security and pension rights. Until adequate job security can be provided to NGO staff, they will not be able to attract and select the most appropriate personnel.

7. Social Recognition

Perhaps most important is to establish the social significance, at all levels of society, of groups and organizations which are neither of governmental or business origin.

In the U.N. system context this could take the form of ensuring that data is collected and published, in the various statistical yearbooks, on the number and variety of social groups at the local and national levels in each country — as is done for data on individuals (Demographic Yearbook), although in much greater detail, museums, schools, newspapers, cinemas, etc. (Unesco Statistical Yearbook), diseases (WHO and FAO Yearbooks), etc. This would help focus attention on the function of this vast network of groups as a major unexplored resource in support of social and cultural development.

Footnotes :

- (1) Discrimination and Fragmentation in the 1970's. International Associations, 1971, 1 p. 28-48; 2, p. 89-108.
- (2) The Use of Multi-meetings: proposal for an improvement to NGO/UN relationships International Associations, 1971, 6, p. 354
- (3) For the responsibility of the United Nations system on this point, see footnote
- (4) We are indebted to Loren Halvorsen, Lutheran World Federation, for the concept and arguments.
- (5) See : International Associations, 24, 1972, 3, p. 151-154, p. 155-157.
- (6) Wanted — New Types of Social Entity, the role of the potential association, international Associations, 1971, 3.
- (7) These tables, reproduced from John McHale, Management, the larger perspective (In : Challenge to Leadership; managing in a changing world, New York, Free Press, 1973), are the result of the integration of two different earlier efforts : in John McHale.
- (8) Information Technology: some critical implications for decision makers. New York, The Conference Board, 1972), and in A.J.N. Judge, The World Network of Organizations (In : International Associations, 1972, 1, p. 18-22). The latter is an expansion of a table by Peter F. Rudge, Ministry and Management, London, Tavistock, 1968.

(continued from page 401)

a very productive aspect of the whole occasion. Also, we were told, participants often put up an unplanned display after they have arrived, once they have seen the other displays. People tend to forget what they already know and the exhibits remind them of what they could contribute.

Frankly, we are very excited about the possibilities for such a process at the international level. It can be a truly enabling experience for all. We think that it would be particularly valuable for teams to come from each NGO so that as a team they could cover as many events and exhibits as possible. Then the team could arrange for its own workshop using one of the meeting rooms and some of the resource persons there (from other NGOs, UNEP or other UN secretariats with environmental programmes) to develop their own plans for their own programmes.

Incidentally, we think that the reduction in formal-procedures would permit government delegates to the UNEP Governing Council, held on the same occasion, to inspect the different NGO (and secretariat) projects without feeling that they have necessarily to interact with the NGOs. This could greatly improve delegates understanding of the NGO role on the environment issue — it might even give rise to dialogue between a particular delegation and a group of NGOs interested in a project in that country.

We believe that this process will maximize the use of resource persons (governmental and nongovernmental), establish personal contacts between NGO groups, link up regional and international resources, save months of planning, and make it possible for the NGO delegates to leave the convention singing the praises of UNEP-NGO relations instead of condemning the whole concept as a total waste of resources. One delegate, Leyo Ndaro, at least might return to Ms NGO regenerated with both hope, information, contacts, and a practical project outline. We don't have a name yet for this new process. The old words « Convention », ' Assembly », . Conference do not work. Perhaps « Multi-meeting », « Market », « Fair » or « Action Catalysis Session ». (Other suggestions are: Educational Environment » or « Human Thermonuclear Reactor Pile » ;)

The more we have talked about this plan the clearer it seems to us that it is, particularly suited for enabling NGOs to interact better amongst themselves, with U.N. secretariats, and with government delegates. We would therefore appreciate it very much if you could consider means by which the organization of some such NGO occasion might be stimulated at the time of the next UNEP Governing Council meeting.