Mobilization for Alienation
vs. Catalysis for Participation
the critical choice for the United Nations system

The Problem
The United Nations often appear to be rapidly destroying itself (1). Disillusionment concerning the capability of international organization to solve world problems is now widespread. This is particularly true of the United Nations system of organizations (and extends commendably to staff members of each secretariat).

Family of nations (4).

They have not been forthcoming.

major Powers of the United Nations.

very much dependent on the response to those already paid or pledged must longer postponed " says one UN

dtions (or their equivalent) additional success, substantial voluntary contributions (and extends corrosively to staff members of each secretariat).

the problems and adapt to them, has Viewed as increasingly symbolic in the three elements of intergovernmental organizations have disappeared to the present, and a feeling of uncertainty and doubt attaches to them (2).

This disillusionment, and the realization that we may have to live with the problems and adapt to them, has lead to severe cuts in United Nations and Agency programme budgets now viewed as increasingly symbolic in value. The U.N. has even had difficulties in meeting its payroll and other day-to-day obligations. The situation has been considerably aggravated by the recent dollar devaluations (3). - All available facts and figures indicate that a major crisis cannot be much longer postponed » says one UN General Assembly document. « Clearly, if a full, final and viable settlement of international organization to the matter of coordination » a large scale escape » into these issues has been used by great powers to curtail the organizations' effectiveness, according to Gunnar Myrdal (1). (This matter will be considered in a later issue). The external response is to consider a new UN General Assembly document. « Clearly, if a full, final and viable settlement of the Organization's urgent financial problems and hopes have been disappointed, and a feeling of uncertainty and doubt attaches to them (2).

The UN Response
Faced with this situation the United Nations has only two responses, one internal, the other external. The internal response is to devote an entirely disproportionate part of the energy of delegates and secretariat » to the matter of coordination » a large scale escape » into these issues has been used by great powers to curtail the organizations' effectiveness, according to Gunnar Myrdal (1). (This matter will be considered in a later issue). The external response is to considerably accelerate the persuasion of public opinion and the creation of a political will ». This was stressed by the Secretary General of UNCTAD as being of the highest priority » in order to avoid a second Development Decade of even deeper frustration than the first one » (TD/36).

To meet this challenge the Economic and Social Information (now incorporated into the office of Public Information) prepared a report (A/AC. 141 / L.71) which was submitted to the fourth session (meeting from 29 September 1969) of the Preparatory Committee for the Second United Nations Development Decade. The report concerned mobilization of public opinion for the Decade. Extracts were published in International Associations (1970, No. 3, p. 154-156) and a critique appeared in the following issue (1970).

No. 4, p. 231-234). The report was used as a guideline in terms of which CESI and, to some extent, DPI have been functioning since 1970.

The UN Secretary General has just produced a Review and Appraisal of the « Dissemination of Information and Mobilization of Public Opinion Relative to Problems of Development » (E/5358, 21 May 1973). This is the follow-up to the CESI report of 1969 and records progress made on the mobilization front. The information for the Secretary General's review » is drawn from replies submitted by member States. But in view of the, limited number of replies received to the three questions raised about public opinion, it was necessary to draw on other sources of information as well. Of the 12 replies received, 10 were from industrial countries, » (para. 3-4). This is indicative of member States' interest in the matter. However, » (Para. 3-4). The review notes that » It would probably be unfair to conclude that a sudden coldness had overcome public opinion in the developed countries. It is more like a closing of the gates to a pattern of generalizations perverted as outcome by over-use » (para. 23).

An Analysis
Now the question is who within the UN system is responsible for the over-use of this pattern of generalizations ? How predictable was the » closing of...
Presentation by
Dr. Margaret Mead,
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of Ekistics

(*) at February 1973 meeting of the ECOSOC Council Committee.

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The word « mobilization » has special associations and was clearly chosen for that reason. Just as in the past, people have been mobilized for war, the UN is now preparing to take the lead in mobilizing people for the war on want. From a governmental point of view, there is perhaps little difference: it is (as one dictionary puts it) a case of creating the people's needs and readiness, and calling into active service in readiness for a course of action decided by government. The question could therefore be raised as to whether there were not some attitudes deriving from war psychology which are not directly associated with the mobilization of the public — such as artificially generating a union mentality. Given that it is in the process of mobilization that the people's freedom of action is bent to that of this lea
der association with the government apparatus, once the process of mobilization is completed, a war machine is in being and individual will can no longer be taken into account. It is the psychology of the various stages in this process which form one topic of peace research. The question raised here is therefore whether in a free society, and under what conditions, public will can or should be mobilized by government. In addition there is the nature, and the rights of man, in the supposition that his will can be bent to suit the government strategy, however benign its intentions.

The message (e.g. the UN programmes), if the body has little independence, is then, as shown in Approach 2 (left-hand side), reminiscent of the approach that will result in action but with alienation of those involved and a host of muddled priorities toward future messages. If the body is more powerful, it may be able to implement it in a counter-productive manner or ensure that it is ignored (Approach 2, right-hand side). Approach 2 probably occurs in all national government bureaucracies which have to respond to frequent and seemingly frenetic calls for UN Days, Years, and other symbolic programmes and questionnaires. The United Nations has still to learn how to implement « Approach 3 » in which is a minimum response to a resource problem and the achievement of its objectives. Approach 3 is much less authoritarian. The responsible body (in this case the appropriate unit of the U.N. system) approaches the external contact (the « target body » in CPI (CES) par
tant) with an offer of help, pointing out what might be achieved by the external contact's information programme in a collaborative and participative enterprise and asking for ideas and assistance from that body. This approach helps the external contact (e.g. an NGO or a national government agency) to gain a correct impression of the proposed programme and to participate in its elaboration (see feedback loop). The programme finally implemented has much greater chance of motivating the external contact and of ensuring its involvement and cooperation.

Of course UN officials regularly ask for assistance and ideas in such arenas as NGO briefing sessions. On closer inspection, however, this is either a completely ritual gesture, or is intended to mean publishing the UN programme to a wider audience. No participation or feedback is involved. Nor could it be « received » by the secretariat in many cases — there is no procedural provision for such feedback messages. Whilst Approach 3 would represent a major step forward if meaningfully implemented, it is nevertheless excessively directive (12), if maximum support is to be obtained for « programmes on world problems. The wording is deliberate here. The UN seeks maximum support for action in terms of « UN programme objectives. These programme objectives however (presumably) represent the desires of « we the peoples ». They do not belong in some mysterious, exclusive and copyrighted manner to the United Nations system as a set of institutions, as the wording would seem to imply. The UN system therefore loses rationality and gains much, by encouraging and facilitating external bodies in the pursuit of their own programme objectives. It is really a question of whether the UN system is interested solely in its own programmes as symbols of departmental and institutional glory and no, or in the accomplishment of their objectives, by whatever channels are available. Unfortunately, it usually seems to be the former, even when (as is often the case) the « programme objectives only have sufficient resources for one staff member plus shared secretariat.

An « Approach 4 » could therefore be conceived which goes beyond marketing, even of the subtler « stimulus-response » type as already analyzed above by Rieff. In Approach 4 the « stimulus » would not come from only one group of bodies, namely the UN Agencies, implying that only they have seen the truth — only the stimulus would not only be received by external bodies, implying that they are all and always « relevant » in their think
ing, compared to that of the UN system. In Approach 4 the « stimulus » would come from any active and concerned body and the « responses » would come from as many bodies as perceived the stimulus to be valid options for their own programmes. This network-oriented approach is the

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basis for a synergistic multiplication of resources directed toward world problems. The challenge to the U.N. system is to help give operational reality to such an approach. Studies are required to clarify it. They could well be combined in a sort of « mini-Jackson Report » to provide the missing component in the thinking of the original Jackson Report (13).

The NGO Role
Let us see how the U.N. is meeting this challenge and moving toward a more up-to-date approach to mobilizing public opinion by involving NGO’s. In December 1972 in Geneva, ECOSOC convened a « Meeting of experts on the particular role of the nongovernmental organizations on the mobilizing of public opinion and political will » (14). Some versions of the title add « in support of the International Development Strategy », The experts were mainly from key NGO’s with some participants from key national development information programmes. The meeting was chaired by Mrs Helvi Sipila, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Social and Humanitarian Matters, in the presence of Curtis Roosevelt, Chief of the ECOSOC NGO Section and W. Gibson Parker, Director of CESUN.

The experts came forth with exciting references to a « new style of relationship », for which a Canadian example was given, in which a much less directive approach was used. This involved going beyond existing NGO’s, shifting emphasis to the participation of people and communities rather than building up membership of particular organizational empires. « Mobilization » was even condemned in favour of involving people where they can participate and where they can learn in « learning centres » — a « people approach » rather than an « institutional approach ».

The counter-current however was to stress the letter by letter interpretation of the U.N’s International Development Strategy and only to examine NGO’s possible relevance to it. Opinions were divided in a somewhat similar manner over whether « NGO » should only mean the select few which have passed all their political examinations by one means or another and achieved consultative status, or whether it should also mean non-recognized or non-international bodies. (It really is quite extraordinary that in this time of increasing social crisis there should still be this U.N. impulse to say « that body is not good enough to help »). Some experts stressed the consequent increasing isolation of the U.N. and its seeming irrelevance to international conditions and issues. The Chairman agreed that the U.N. had lost contact with the people to whom (not with whom ?) it should be talking. There were frequent references to the impression that NGO’s were « used » by the U.N. rather than being in partnership with it.
After an exciting start the meeting decayed considerably. A quite incredible procedure was adopted of asking participants to hastily note down on scraps of paper their recommendations which were then typed up in a report examined word by word in plenary. No working documents were prepared beforehand to improve the quality of the final result. The report resulting from this lengthy process was unfortunately not circulated; instead, a completely different version was later produced (as an internal document only). This is excellent in many ways. It seems to have been based on an inspired interpretation of the sense of the meeting rather than on the above procedure mentioned. The introduction is reproduced here (on page 413). Now the report itself contains some very exciting paragraphs. A rough analysis groups them, according to the « approaches » above, as follows: Approach 1, no paragraphs; Approach 2, 5 paragraphs; Approach 3, 5 paragraphs; Approach 4, 6 paragraphs; uncatalogued, 5 paragraphs.

The Current Reality
The above report was produced on 24 January 1973. The Secretary-General's Panel of 18 had appeared on 21 May 1972. It does not mention the meeting or the report. Its recommendations (none of which suggest any new departures at this critical time) contain only one reference to NGOs. « It would undoubtedly be helpful to the United Nations if NGOs, which are involved in all aspects of the study, would prepare an « NGO report » before the meeting » (page 26) in precisely this sort of vein, as if they were concerned to find a place for the NGO movement in the United Nations. It seems to have been adopted by the meeting without criticism.

To be meaningful and credible, partnership - talk or participation in the United Nations system - should extend visibility into the documents of CESI and the Office of Public Information. In the next meeting of U.N. system report, with its knowledge of NGOs, has only 80 produced a brochure on the whole question. Why is there no imaginative reports and suggestions? Why is there no basic literature on the U.N. system which is available to the thousands of visitors to secretariat buildings, information centres and regional offices, and which is the basic ammunition of the national and local United Nations Associations? Why is the « partnership » talk not in the standard secretariat guided-four speech? Why not tell the people of the channels, via which they can work in partnership with the U.N. system? By stressing the « mighty institutional » image, people have no means of working to the U.N. other than by purchasing pretty postcards and stamps, or selling the U.N. line in their home community. The latter is the traditional « mighty institutional » role not stressed in the standard secretariat guided-four speech. The meeting which is now at all too evident, often because of the stifling of NGO participation in U.N. controlled programmes (Approach 2).

The Critical Choice
The public information material of the U.N. must show non-governmental (14) action, voluntary action, people's movements, etc., are related to, facilitated and reinforced by, U.N. action, and have both contribute in partnership to common objectives. Objectives which are those of « if we the peoples... » and not of an anarcho-syndicalist system of rebellions trying to monopolize every iota of credit. This is not to say that the United Nations should stress the importance of the existing NGOs, which in quite a number of cases may be as institutionally distant from the people as the United Nations (partly for similar reasons and partly in imitation of sterile, status-boosting UN procedures). Rather, the stress should be placed on the ability of « NGO's » to act in the light of their own understanding through their own styles of organization, whether they exist as traditional NGOs or need to be created using new formulae in their own communities. It is the importance of this complementary creative mode of action which should be stressed, for at the moment NGOs constitute the underdeveloped « third world » of the organizational system (15).

It is only by achieving this form of « self-mobilization », catalysed (not organized) in part by United Nations efforts, that the progressive alienation of people from all forms of organized action can be retarded. The United Nations must trust that a mass movement in this « people action » would result in a worthwhile percentage of it being directly of value to the specific U.N. concerns (although even the remainder constitutes a valuable, but unrecognized, component of social development). That this is likely to be the case is fairly evident from the amount of independent grass-roots concern with peace, environment, racial discrimination and other such issues. « Catalyse » is the key to the needed United Nations public information effort, not « mobilization ». « Catalyse » leads to participation, mobilization leads to alienation.

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Extract from the report and recommendations of the UN experts meeting in Geneva 13-15 December 1972 on the particular role of the NGOs in mobilizing public opinion and political will. A theme that was repeated over and over again throughout this meeting was the need for a new set of relationshipships between the United Nations system and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the people of the world. The UN's present attitude toward NGOs reflects a situation where not only are people unaware and often uninterested in the work of the United Nations, but also where the United Nations is becoming increasingly irrelevant and it is essential that the United Nations, generally, and the Economic and Social Council in particular, understand the implications of this situation and respond to it.

In this regard, there was a strong feeling that NGOs will no longer tolerate being used by the United Nations — told what the United Nations wants them to promote without being consulted during the formulation stages of the programme. A change in the present process is imperative if the United Nations is to regain the interest and support of the world population — and the NGOs from which each can mutually benefit.

Underlying the discussion of the group was an urgency to bridge a gap between the governmental and non-governmental sectors. Implicit here is the idea of engaging NGOs as a means of reaching the peoples of the world in order to involve them in the international community's effort to work through an International Development Strategy, towards a universal society where social justice, with its political and economic consequences, appears as a realistic possibility.

To accomplish this, the group felt that the United Nations would have to take the lead in establishing a relationship with NGOs and their constituencies, where a style leading to trust and confidence is clearly evident. 1. The United Nations should invite the participation of NGOs, selected on the basis of their special expertise, in the planning and drafting of programmes and reports to be submitted to the United Nations governing bodies. This should be done 1) by direct representation of NGOs in preparatory meetings, 2) by use of information collected by NGOs concerning the issue under study. This means involving NGOs in all aspects of policy making — planning, implementation. It will not only provide the United Nations with a valuable pool of expertise and information, but will also increase its awareness of public opinion.

[Secretarial Note: This might be accomplished without violating paragraph 12 of resolution 1296 (LVIII).]

5. UN should develop channels for a continuous, genuine UN/NGO dialogue with a cross-section of NGOs to ensure a two-way communication with NGOs. In this regard, provision should be made for the collection of data on action taken by NGOs on issues of development. (Data on their technical assistance efforts as well as their educational, informational and political efforts.)

13. The facilities available to NGOs directly affect their ability to fulfill their communication and other functions. The ECOSOC should look into the facilities available at Headquarters, Geneva, and other UN Offices for the purpose of improving these.

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