

Collective learning from calls for global action

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This document was originally prepared for the planning meeting in January 1981 of the Planetary Initiative for the World We Choose (described in this issue, pages 7-10, and 11-14). Despite its many limitations, it identifies concerns which need to be borne in mind when reflecting on the merits of any new proposal for action at this time. The proposals emerging from the recent Casablanca Forum of NGOs (November 1981) are a case in point (see pages 18-25), as is the Club of Rome's new Forum Humanum project, and the Stuttgart proposal (pages 29-33). The World Forum of Transnational Associations (Brussels, 1980) must of course also be seen in this light.

Introduction

Calls for global action are much to be welcomed in this time of uncertainty. The following comments attempt to focus on the significance of the ever-present gap between the vision underlying such proposals and the reality of the outcome. Given that the past two decades have seen the birth and demise of many global programmes and campaigns, are there lessons which can usefully be kept in mind when assessing new calls for action. Why is it that initiators of new calls for action pay little attention to the weaknesses of past efforts? How can blindspots be uncovered to give greater strength to such initiatives as they emerge? How can we learn from the inadequacies of efforts in the past? The following points constitute a rudimentary checklist of points which merit reflection in designing and responding to any global call for action, particularly one based on the energies of grassroots participation and mobilization of «we the peoples».

Recent examples

2. In what way will an initiative enable us to move significantly beyond initiatives of the past? Consider the following examples:

2.1. *World Symposium on Humanity (1979)*: setting aside the personality and financial problems, in what way will the initiative attempt to achieve more than the Symposium? The Symposium failed in many ways to provide any integration of the energies represented. To what extent was it more than a fun experience with some ad-hoc high points?

2.2. *Toronto World Future Congress (1980)* (Theme: Thinking globally, acting locally): this Congress brought together a large number of highly qualified people.

But no coherent message or course of action emerged. It was an idea supermarket for «future consumers».

2.3. *Findhorn Onearth Gatherings (annual)* (Theme: Vision for the 80s). These gatherings mobilize 200-300 people every year. The meeting process (speakers, groups) generates much enthusiasm.

Whilst this must have many effects when the individuals return to their own communities, it is far from clear that considerably increasing the numbers so effected would constitute a significant breakthrough.

Again the problems of moving to a higher level of integration are avoided, as are the significant differences of opinion of those present, whether as resource people or humble participants.

2.4. *UN/INGO Forums*: such events have been held in parallel with recent UN Conferences (Vienna, Rome, Vancouver, Stockholm). They bring together many organizations for lengthy debates and informal discussions. The question is whether, knowing the results achieved, the organizations would have committed the resources to participating. The resolutions and declarations of such events are certainly of debatable significance.

2.7. Many academic (WOMP, Aspen, Pughwash, UNU/GPID, World University, WAAS, etc.) or governmental meetings

have been held which attempt to come to terms with the issues covered by the planned initiative. These responses have been inadequate to the challenge, or it would not be necessary to envisage this initiative. But why have they been inadequate? What are the lessons to be learnt?

2.8. *International campaigns*: Many information campaigns have been tied to (U.N.) international «decades», «years» or «days» (e.g. children, environment, etc.). These mobilize many groups and coalitions. In what way have these been inadequate to the challenge?

Problems of emphasis

3. In the light of the initiative prospectus as it now stands, each of the above could be seen by their proponents as having closely related, if not identical, intentions. What are the possible dimensions of the planned event in the light of such past exercises:

3.1. *Inspiration*: Namely the necessary use of «heavies» (super-star speakers) to attract people to the event and its programme and to establish its significance.

Problem: such people may be encouraged to take up much programme time, even though there is little to say that is not already available (e.g. in their books or in reports of previous meetings). Little attention is given to what people can do once they have been stimulated to an appropriate level of enthusiasm. Little attention is given to the lack of integration (if not con-

fact) between those providing the inspiration. Any overemphasis on inspiration necessarily presupposes that participants are not already adequately inspired or motivated and thus alienates those who hope to use the occasion to move collectively on to the next step

3.2. Education: Namely to help those who participate to achieve some new level of understanding of the complex of issues with which the world is confronted.

Problem: this can absorb much programme time. The question is whether the focus on learning is not a disguise for inability to focus collectively on the fact that there is a marked inability to act even when everyone has learnt the same lessons.

3.3. Information exchange: Namely exchange of ideas, opportunities, contacts, etc.

Problem: this very beneficial process is usually creatively haphazard and it is questionable whether it has led in the past to working methods adequate to the challenge. By its very nature it can at best lead to a low-level organic integration.

3.4. Celebration and expression: It is entirely appropriate that the event should have a celebratory character to mark the achievement of a certain moment of integration. Enjoyment and expression of relationship are essential oils for integration processes.

Problem: Celebration can easily be used as a disguise for individual and collective inability to achieve anything beyond the event. The more successful the celebration, the more successful the disguise: a celebration of inability to act.

3.5. Planning and coordination: Efforts may be made to develop ways of linking together groups and individuals for future action.

Problem: Coordinating bodies are short-lived (or out-live their usefulness) and are too frequently « letterhead » or « talk-shop » devices. Networks are frequently exercises in optimism which fail to work or attract commitment for any length of time.

3.6. Vision and design: Such events often aspire to envision and design the future.

Problem: the vision, if any, tends to remain at the level of enthusiasm and is not confronted with constraints essential to the design process from which action blueprints can emerge. If designs do emerge, they tend to be simplistic and to reflect the views of the self-selected group which worked on them.

3.7. Declarations: Efforts may be made to focus the collective intentions into the form of a declaration.

Problem: the preparation and discussion of such a document tends to consume

considerable time. Little is heard of the declaration after the event and it seldom provides the platform for the collective action originally intended. The same is true for the written report or audio-visual record of such events.

3.8. Public impact: A main purpose of the event may be media impacts to inform the general public

Problem: the compromises made to this end distort the programme to the point where little may be achieved in reality amongst the participants. The event becomes a symbol of « what might be » without facing up to the construction of the steps to get there.

3.9. Creativity: stress may be placed on stimulating the emergence of creative ideas with which to respond to the challenge.

Problem: Whilst creative ideas may emerge, there is seldom a satisfactory receptacle within which they are received. It is usually the case of seeds falling upon stony ground.

3.10. Action: It may be hoped to use the event to do something on the spot as opposed to talking about doing it, or about the need for others to do it.

Problem: Action undertaken without reflection is usually of short-lived or highly localized significance. This may be an adequate symbol (despite the intention) but does not have the wide-ranging impact desired except in the case of highly dramatic actions.

3.11. Conceptualization: It may be hoped to clarify intellectually the interdisciplinary guidelines for possible action.

Problem: Emphasis on the analytical intellectual mode can decay swiftly into a debate between opposing schools of thought. Little attention is given to the problems of synthesis.

And when interdisciplinarity is an explicit concern, the consequence is often merely a euphoric exchange of ideas at a level of superficiality which guarantees that any disagreements will be quickly disguised and avoided in order to create the impression that the initiative has come realistically to grips with the central issues. There is little record of any concrete action emerging from such exchanges in the past.

3.12. Spiritual invocation: it may be considered important to introduce a spiritual dimension in order to invoke new insight

Problem: those in favour of this emphasis tend to consider it of such significance that only incidental attention needs to be given to other issues and notably to concrete steps towards action.

4. The cautionary remarks above can be considered in relation to:

the initial planning meeting, preparatory national/local events, culminating conference or event, as well as any follow-up. The problem is to guard against over-emphasizing any of the above tendencies. It is not a question of maximizing one or more of them at the expense of the others. The challenge is to interrelate these essentially complementary energies, despite conflicting individual or group preferences for particular emphases.

Metaphor of birth

5. The challenge can best be described by the very uncomfortable analogy to the process of human birth. Collective events as currently envisaged may involve titillation leading, if successful, merely to mild participant arousal. Or they can result in some form of effective intercourse, possibly leading to orgasms of collective enthusiasm with little outcome. Additional factors of major importance are however required to ensure any quickening of a new departure as a result of effective conception through fertilization. And even then the result may be a miscarriage, a still-birth, or even malformed.

Unfortunately it would seem from past events that excessive attention has been given to the processes engendering enthusiasm, with little concern for the adequacy of the receptacle (a womb) within which the results of the exercise can be contained and brought to fruition (to say nothing of the question of midwifery and post-natal care).

There is a problem of collective, responsible parenthood, as opposed to the short-term, and frequently irresponsible, concerns of casual intercourse, however pleasurable.

6. The present world crisis is such that those who are prepared to respond to it should not be called upon to waste their energies on unfruitful activities. The challenge lies in finding ways to weave together the very different energies which are needed in order to constitute a viable new form.

Past experience of still-born and failed initiatives indicates how little we consciously « know » about this process of engendering a new departure. It may well be that the collective process is a perfectly natural one – parents after all do not have to be concerned with the biochemistry of fertilization. But there are certain preconditions for dependence on nature as any farmer knows – bulls and cows frequently have a rather fuzzy (if not comical) idea about what is involved. Is it possible that the fundamental process of « presenting » and « addressing » is poorly understood, if at all, in the way in which configurations of groups constitute themselves in relation to the complex « problem-mandala » of their preoccupations?

7. In many domains (e.g. music) tangible changes in forms have been the precursors of analogous changes in under-

standing of psycho-social reality. Could it be that the ignorance and imbalances characteristic of past relationships between the sexes have lessons to offer concerning errors in the collective approach to engendering viable new psycho-social forms? It is only very recently that sex education has made any inroads on the, often quaint, misinformation and furtive - dirty - secrets by which the physical process has been surrounded - at the price of untold misery and disillusionment to those initially caught in the compensating glamour. Is it not possible that many social change initiatives are in effect couched in terms which reinforce an analogously quaint misunderstanding of what is really involved in the « gutsy » process of engendering new psycho-social forms?

More troubling still, it is only recently that some religions have started to release the sexual process from being an unfortunate, if necessary, manifestation of the beast in man. Is it possible that there is still a similarly unfortunate confusion blocking understanding of the analogous psycho-social process?

Such misinformation can only lead to a double standard, characteristic of Victorian England, for example. In the prudery of the salon, babies « appeared » as a result of an unmentionable process clouded in euphemism. Complementing this, social change was accomplished and enforced at a distance by brutality and bloodshed. Is it possible that such a polarity now persists between the artificially « heady » debates of (international) meetings, complemented by the violent confrontations of social change and revolution in the field. Can the envisaged initiative break out of the double standard? Can it « recognize » simultaneously the two poles of the duality whereby new forms are engendered, and thereby move into a more organic mode without the primitive extremes of artificiality and bloodshed?

Possible criteria for success

8. By what criteria is it possible to determine whether this new initiative is moving out of the currently impotent mode into one offering some hope of breakthrough or transmutation?

8.1. *Topic interrelationship*: the prospectus should do more than simply provide a short-list of major world problems with lip service paid to the fact that they are all « interrelated ». What (meeting) processes can be used which respect the degree of interrelationship, the artificiality of the categories, and the essential incompatibility of the perspectives which need to be brought into juxtaposition? For it would seem that most of our essential concerns come in pairs which are dynamically opposed to one another, and this opposition can only be reconciled within a dynamic framework characterized by apparent paradox and contradiction.

8.2. *Group interrelationships*: what degree of group interrelationship is called for by

this initiative? Would that achieved during the recent International Year of the Child be considered adequate? If more is required, the prospectus should be more explicit about facing up to the very real obstacles to better networking. It is not sufficient to be content to alienate those who do not conform. The energy of complementary viewpoints in opposition is a guarantee of realism.

8.3. *Role of initiators*: such initiatives are usually judged by the bodies who function as focalizers. The prospectus needs to be explicit as to how the process will move beyond the limitations of the focalizers in order to benefit from the diversity of organizations which might be attracted to this initiative. What are the conscious and unconscious filters by which topics and collaborating organizations will be selected? How are such filters justified?

8.4. *Unaskable questions*: what are the questions which this initiative considers unfruitful to confront? Can the initiative face up to its own « shadow » (in the Jungian sense)?

For example, the prospectus may stress the importance of « positive » attitudes. Does this effectively exclude any exercise of the critical faculty? Does it mean a commitment to avoid using sentences containing negatives (except in relation to negativity itself)? This leads to very simplistic thinking, day/night, high/low, young/old, life/death, summer/winter, etc. are necessary complements. As any gardener knows, an « eternal summer time » could only be unfruitful in the long-term (however much participants enjoyed the sunny period). Initiatives often reinforce the assumption that the world crisis can be resolved by everybody embracing everybody else and thus dissolving all differences in an upwelling of empathy and love. This archetypal vision avoids any concern with the significance of those differences in perspective for the development of the energy of those who are identified with them. Human development is not simply a matter of eliminating differences. Those differences presumably need to be brought together into some appropriate relationship to each other as a basis for whatever is to be the next step in the evolution of humanity.

8.5. - *So what* -: it is useful to consider the significance of the initiative as though it had already been completed. What then has been accomplished and has it been more than a « useful exercise »?

What is the likelihood that much will be done about any « Plan of Action » (of which the U.N. has generated many of doubtful impact)? If it is merely an educational exercise, should those with wider expectations have devoted energy to the initiative rather than to other things?

8.6. *Acknowledgement of past initiatives*: does the prospectus acknowledge past initiatives and is it designed in the light of lessons learnt from such experiences? Or does it create the impression that it is

the first effort of this kind and therefore free to act without the constraints of past experience?

8.7. *Limitations*: does the initiative recognize the geo-political limitations of its impact? Or is it content to claim world-wide coverage in the light of token activity in other geo-political blocs? How can compensations for such limitations be designed?

8.8. *Personality problems*: how does the initiative plan to handle the personality problems between the figures which usually underly and undermine such projects? Is the « democratic » procedure of electing pre-selected officers into the usual hierarchical framework to be accepted uncritically rather than as symptomatic of a mode of proven inadequacy? Or is it sufficient to ignore these problems in the hope that they will quietly disappear?

8.9. *Self-reference*: in preparing this initiative has its advocated procedure be meaningfully applied to itself? Can sufficient new content be given to a « Plan of Action » to make the work sufficiently magnetic and distinctive from previous initiatives? Can a sufficiently exciting scenario be prepared for the culminating initiative? Can sufficient content be given to the hoped for change of attitude in the participants - and organizers?

Conclusion

It would be a serious mistake to perceive the above considerations as a « negative » or « pessimistic » damper on any initiative. The international community has experimented with a variety of initiatives over the past two decades. We should not fool ourselves by the content of the « success stories » which those involved feel obliged to circulate afterwards for public relations reasons. Achievements have varied from modest to insignificant when measured against the dimensions of the problem. The first step towards more significant initiatives is to recognize how the previous ones have tended to fail. The purpose of this document is simply to point out that possibly we are not taking into account important constraints. To avoid acknowledging constraints is the most stupid form of « positive » thinking. Constraints are essential to good design as any architect, artist or inventor knows. The question is how can we learn to use them creatively.

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If we do not know how we are part of the solution, we cannot understand the nature of the problem we face.

Is the planned initiative to be a metaphor of our collective problem or of the solution required, or will it be a catalyst for world transformation?