



# Do Problems Really Exist ?

Well over 10,233 world problems are now reported by international bodies. Do they really exist, other than from the viewpoints of the 20,000 organizations demonstrating such concern in identifying them? For one major intergovernmental agency, the Director of Political Affairs stated quite frankly that problems ceased to "exist" as soon as the shifting political priorities removed the obligation to deal with them. "Illiteracy is not our concern" claimed the representative of another agency responsible for major literacy programmes. For other bodies, even the attempt to document recognized problems is a fundamental error because giving attention to such "negativity" detracts from more "positive" initiatives. Discovering how to navigate amongst such contrasting perspectives is one challenge offered to readers of the 1440-page *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, recently completed by an editorial team at the Union of International Associations.

Since the Encyclopedia represents the completion of a major phase in the UIA programme, it is the focus of this edition of *Transnational Associations*. In particular, the introduction to the volume is reproduced, in which the general approach is explained and a summary of the contents is given.

This ambitious new publication attempts the unusual task of deliberately juxtaposing contradictory perceptions about the world problems to which some attach great importance, while others consider, them totally unfounded and irrelevant. It is intended to be a comprehensive sourcebook on recognized world problems, their interconnections, and the organizational and conceptual resources available to respond to them. The editors argue that by presenting fundamentally incompatible viewpoints within the same context, readers will be encouraged

to discover new approaches to understanding and action, sufficiently complex to encompass the factions, conflicts and worldviews by which people are separated - from each other and from a promising future.

In contrast to the doom-mongering initiatives of the past, relatively little space is given to such classic "mega-problems" as overpopulation, nuclear war, resource depletion and hunger. These continue to defy collective initiative - provoking a sense of impotent despair - despite the volumes of information written on them. Instead, more space is given to the thousands of less widely-acknowledged problems which are claimed to compose or sustain these mega-problems through a network of 17,000 aggravating and alleviating relationships indicated in the book. In reality, it is on such specific problems that groups feel empowered to act. They also tend to include the unforeseen stumbling blocks to the success of any remedial projects. The range of problems described includes:

Excessive public debt, Sacrilege, Instability of commodities trade, Acid rain, Loneliness, Radioactive fallout, Forced labour, Shortage of fuelwood, Judicial error, Food grain spoilage, Cruelty to children, Uncertainty, Soil erosion, and Limited acceptance of international treaties.

The basic bias of the book favours the presentation of alternative viewpoints, from every school of thought, specialization or moral standpoint. Highly controversial "problems" such as capitalism and communism are therefore included with appropriate counter-arguments to reflect the nature of the ideological controversy. The editors point out that most reference books usually avoid documenting problems as such, especially those that are embarrassingly familiar, unpleasant or intractable, such as nepotism, corruption, torture or apathy. Many

are seldom described elsewhere in specific or precise terms. Because of the controversial material included, the book may therefore be considered as a collection of the biases active in the international community. It aims to provide an overview of the world's fears, whether real or imaginary, that inspire or undermine collective initiatives.

The Encyclopedia is produced as a complement to the UIA's 3-volume *Yearbook of International Organizations*. This serves as a clearinghouse for information on 20,000 nonprofit bodies of every kind, focus and persuasion, from Amnesty International to the United Nations. (The third volume of that Yearbook, entitled *Global Action Networks*, groups international organizations, together with corresponding world problems.) It is principally from the documents provided by such bodies that problems were described.

In response to the challenge of the problem focus, the second part of the Encyclopedia structures complementary information on the human and conceptual resources available or by which people are inspired to act. One section, for example, identifies 2,000 constructive or destructive values, of which "interest" and "foulness" emerge as the most fundamental in each case. Another section describes some 628 concepts of individual human development as well as over 950 subjective modes of awareness, from many cultures and traditions, experienced during the process of such development. Some of the more unusual to Western eyes include: abounding abasement, crazy monkey ego consciousness, and flow (notably experienced in sport and chess). In response to the current importance of many international meetings, another section focuses on techniques for transformative conferencing, through which group

energy can be brought into focus more effectively.

Although the Encyclopedia deliberately avoids presenting any specific solution to problems, one section describes or identifies over 7,000 strategies which are advocated or used in the response to problem conditions. The central concern of the editors is with the question of how to interrelate conflicting strategies favoured by different bodies, namely how to build a society based on the reality of the co-existence of inherently incompatible answers to social policy issues. Another section therefore assembles insights from different disciplines and traditions, indicating how the required integration might be achieved by deliberately alternating between policies to compensate for the weaknesses of each. But no single intellectual framework can encompass such alternation between competing paradigms. A section on communication therefore develops 80 familiar metaphors through which the characteristics and limitations of patterns of alternation, between different perspectives and orientations, may be understood. These include crop rotation cycles, weather, traffic circulation, bicycling, ball games and dancing.

In contrast to the many efforts to name "the key problem" or "the key solution" - magically appropriate to all the world's ills, the editors consider that, if anything, it is precisely that mode of thinking which is itself the key problem. They compare it to the inappropriateness of attempting to select either the one key species in a web of interdependent species, or the single strategy appropriate to the complexities of gardening or bringing up a child.

Aside from its content, the Encyclopedia is quite unusual in the manner of its production. All the work was done on the UIA's new in-house local area computer network using

the latest advances in hardware and text database software for a decentralized application. The information was then passed to a subcontractor for page-make-up, index extraction and photocomposition. As an indication of the sophistication of this phase alone, the procedure received the first Printing World Award (25 June 1986) for the "most innovative application of computers in typesetting", specially sponsored as a Bicentenary Award by Her Majesty's Stationery Office (UK). The Encyclopedia and Yearbook series are published by KG Saur Verlag (Munich), reputed for its wide range of international reference books.

This publication is above all the fruit of continuing collaboration with a considerable number of the 20,000 international governmental and non-governmental organizations listed in the *Yearbook of International Organizations*. Such bodies make available a wide range of material on the areas of their concern. This is processed for all the publications of the UIA. Special requests were however made with regard to this particular publication.

Special thanks are due to the United Nations and its associated bodies, especially the FAO, ILO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNIDO, WHO, the United Nations Library (Geneva), and the United Nations University. Thanks are equally due to the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Many other organizations provided invaluable assistance. Without the range of material which they supplied, from the complete spectrum of ideological and disciplinary perspectives, and already structured to give a world focus rather than a national one, the editorial task would have been much more difficult.

**Anthony Judge**