

Meaningful Association

strategic constraints and possibilities
in the information society

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Crisis of Meaning

- Conceptual incoherence in strategy
 - global
 - local
- Loss of sense of direction
- Loss of faith in systems and beliefs
- Fragmentation of initiatives
- Inter-disciplinary chaos and disrespect
- Conceptual and policy gridlock
- Severe erosion of institutional credibility





Frenetic Strategic Desperation

- Overproduction of
 - appeals
 - manifestos, declarations
 - resolutions
- Mutual recrimination
- Unrelated new initiatives
 - unrealistic action plans
 - proliferation of organizations
 - content-free conferences

Uncertainty

- Crises in financial system
- From employment to unemployment
- Social insecurity (safety net inadequacy)
- Urban violence and personal safety
- Environmental fragility
- Erosion of moral and ethical standards
- Institutional corruption
- Policy indecision & Leadership vacuum
- Policy discontinuity -- broken promises

In Quest of New Vision ?

- Dependence on a single global vision?
- Dependence on a single metaphor - “vision”?
 - no “**sound**”  an “**unsound**” future?
 - no “**smell**”  great visions that “**stink**”?
 - no “**touch**”  for future “**untouchables**”?
 - no “**taste**”  towards a “**tasteless**” future?
- From vision to super-vision?
- Vision “myopia” or “presbyopia”?

Global Values ?

- Whose values?
 - whose values are recognized?
 - whose values are neglected?
 - what meaning do they have locally?
- Who designs the system of global values?
 - how are the values related?
- Who imposes the values?
 - what of alternative values?
 - and those who disagree?
- How do new values emerge...for the future?

Rule of Law?

- Miscarriage of justice?
- Legal harassment? Abuse of police power?
- Inaccessibility of justice (cost)?
- Inconsistencies between legal systems?
- Constraints on risk taking and innovation?
- Corruption of judiciary and inspectorates?
- Treaties: unsigned, unratified or unenforced?
- *Qui custodit ipsos custodiet?*

Information Overload & Underuse

- A truism -- there is “too much” information
- Overproduction of information
- Limited dissemination / readership
- Diminishing collective attention span
- Fragmented & disorganized information
- “Dumbing down” public information
- Unreliable information -- misinformation
- An analogous problem?: *overpopulation*

Technological Pressures

- Pressure of new technology (and cost)
- Pressure to update technology (and cost)
- Planned obsolescence
- Increasing technology gaps
 - access (especially by the underprivileged)
 - skills required
 - incompatibility of equipment
 - outdated modes of work
- Increasing cost of maintaining technology

Severe Resource Constraints

- Reduced budgets
- Competition for limited resources
- Impoverished people and organizations
- Increasing resource gap between:
 - associations
 - government institutions
 - commercial organizations
- Destructive subsidies of new initiatives
 - substituting subsidized for sustainable services
(an IGO strategy undermining NGOs)

Politicized Definitional Games?

- Development? (Economic? Social? Cultural?)
- Sustainability?
- Human rights? (Individual? Collective?)
- Peace? Security? (Neighbourhood? Regional?)
- Capitalism? Free trade?
- Globalization?
- Association? NGO? (eg UNDP vs UNESCO)
- Civil society? (Un-civil society?)

Competition for “Access”

- Replication of antiquated royal court model
- Lobbyists = Petitioners
- Competitive maneuvering for access
- Clammering at the anti-chamber door
- Cultivating elitist access
- Token response to marginal petitioners
- Penalizing physical absence (“join the queue”)
- Illusion that access ensures valuable action

Inappropriate Policy Metaphors for a rapidly evolving society

- Military metaphors (for peaceful purposes)
 - **targeting**... population groups
 - **mobilizing**...support
 - **war**...on drugs
- Simplistic, selective, static, linear metaphors
 - **vision** (but no other sense)
 - **programming**...people and organizations
 - **points** in a **line** of argument
 - **state** of the world / environment / etc

Evolving Pattern of Associations in a learning society

- Associations of ideas, **concepts**, theories
- Associations of different **technologies**
- Associations across **cultures**
- Associations across faiths and **beliefs**
- Associations of **values** (for quality of life)
- **Aesthetic** associations
- Associations of **people** and other bodies

Discovering Reality

- Declassification of secret documents
- Revelation of institutional corruption
- Confrontation of injustice and disadvantage
- Honouring alternative insights and traditions
- Acknowledgement of misinformation
- Independence from traditional procedures
- Empowerment of the individual and community

Powerful Meaning Tools

- New meeting process techniques
- New information technologies
 - information collection
 - information dissemination
 - visualization of information
- New approaches to knowledge organization
- New belief systems
- New forms of social organization
- New metaphors and paradigms

New Strategic Directions

- Personal development
- Group development -- and partnerships
- Community development -- localization
- Empowering the disadvantaged
- Cultivating and honouring traditional wisdom
- By-passing conventional constraints
- Professionalization
- “Direct action”
- Adapting conceptual breakthroughs to praxis

New Strategic Styles

- Flexibility - Nimbleness - Vigilance
- Emergency preparedness (eg budget cuts)
- Doing more with less
- Reducing dependencies (and de-linking)
- Opportunism (notably in partnerships)
- Continuing learning (notably via software)
- Organization reconfiguration
- De-materialization (to knowledge-ware)
- Adapting to change and impermanence

New Patterns of Meaning

- Temporary coalitions (eg against-MAI)
- New configurations (eg One World)
- Unexpected partnerships (eg UN+Multinationals)
- Cross-cultural encounters
- Inter-sectoral and transversal patterns (eg URI)
- Dynamic responses to unpredictable changes
 - from space orientation to time orientation
 - from permanent to temporary

Strategic Opportunities for Association

- New associations of ideas, **concepts**, theories
- New associations of different **technologies**
- New associations across **cultures**
- New associations across faiths and **beliefs**
- New **aesthetic** associations
- New **metaphors**
- New associations of **people** and other bodies

Implementing Associative Strategies

- Exploring new patterns of concepts, theories
- Exploring new inter-modal technologies
- Exploring cross-cultural fertilization
- Exploring dialogue across faiths and beliefs
- Exploring new aesthetic associations
- Exploring new metaphors
- Exploring new associations of people, groups, etc

Embodying Appropriate Constraints

- Learning from simplistic “globalization”
- Dangerous myth of universal association
- Diversity essential to meaningful unity
- Developing appropriate knowledge-ware
- Balancing “access” against “non-access”
- Working pragmatically with tragic gaps

Implications for a future

“union of international associations”

- “association” means more than “NGO”
 - what “associations” for a meaningful future?
 - including what non-tangible forms of association?
- “international” means more than geo-politics
 - what “boundaries” need to be related?
 - what “globality” for meaningful universality?
- “union” means more than “membership”
 - what complex forms of integration are possible?
 - how can they be made comprehensible?

Example of a Successful Initiative

Swadhyaya (India)

- Neither a cult nor a sect
- Neither a party nor an association
- Not limited to a particular section of society
- Neither against centralization nor for reforming society
- Both a metaphor and a movement
 - R K Srivastava (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, 1986)

Form of Future Coherence?

- Legally constituted body?
- Temporary coalition? Meeting?
- Pattern of electronic exchanges?
- Global dialogue?
- Complex configuration of concepts?
- Ethical framework?
- Embodied in imagery rather than text?