

TRANSFORMATIVE

CONFERENCING

Problems and possibilities on the new frontier of
high-risk gatherings concerning social development

A.J.N. Judge

Collection of papers reprinted from the journal Transnational Associations in the light of experience in the Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development Project of the United Nations University (1978-82) and as a contribution to future intercultural, interdisciplinary initiatives of that kind

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This document is dedicated to participants at international, inter-cultural, interdisciplinary, inter-ideological and action-oriented conferences who recognize that the full potential of such gatherings in responding to global crisis is very far from being achieved, and who experience intense frustration at the human resources wasted in meetings organized according to the conventional pattern.

This document is also dedicated to those people and groups who take unusual risks in experimenting with new ways of organizing large international conferences with the intent of achieving significant impact on the process of human and social development world-wide.

Their initiatives have been evident, to a greater or lesser extent, in arenas such as the following:

- UN/NGO "Parallel" Conferences (Stockholm, Rome, Vancouver, Vienna)
- European Association for Humanistic Psychology
- First International Conference of the Society for General Systems Research (London, 1979)
- First Global Futures Congress (Toronto, 1982)
- First New Age Congress (Florence, 1978)
- Forum International
- Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development Project of the United Nations University (1978-82)
- Infoterra Network Management Meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme (Moscow, 1979)
- International Conference on Transpersonal Psychology (Reykjavik, 1975)
- International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (Chicago, 1973)
- One Earth Gathering (Findhorn, 1976, 1979)
- Planetary Initiative for the World We Choose (Toronto, 1983)
- World Symposium on Humanity (Los Angeles/Toronto/London, 1979)
- World Futures Studies Federation (Rome, 1972)

Their valiant efforts with limited resources deserve greater recognition. Above all there is a need to learn from both their successes and from their failures. Those who fail to learn from such failures run the considerable risk of repeating them.

"If we are to achieve results never before attained,
we must expect to employ methods never before attempted."

- Francis Bacon

INTRODUCTION

1. Meetings, and particularly international meetings are a vital feature of society. They are a principal means whereby different perspectives are « assembled », « meet » or touch each other, possibly following a period of separation (« reunion »). Through such occasions resources are brought together to bear on a question of common concern (« conference ») or they may provide the environment in which unrelated questions can emerge spontaneously (« Forum »).

2. Considerable efforts have been successfully made to increase the efficiency of meeting organization/operation through the use of management skills, communications technology and specially conceived buildings. The organizational skills have been professionalized and are available as a commercial service, whilst the quantity of meetings has given rise to a whole « conference industry » of significant economic importance.

3. Despite the ease with which meetings are held, and the increasing number of such events, there is rising concern that many of these do not fulfil the expectations of participants and of those whose future depends upon their outcome.

4. Some efforts have been made to move beyond a concern for the « mechanics » of meeting organization in order to facilitate those processes which are more congenial and significant to participants. These innovations have been for the most part experimental or implemented under special conditions and are primarily applicable to small groups. The majority of meetings has been little affected, if at all.

5. The fundamental problem seems to be associated with the fact that the apparent success at « processing » agenda items, participants viewpoints and documents is matched by only an apparent or superficial consensus whose impact if any, is frequently limited to one of short-term public relations. The meeting outcome is such that the collective empowerment is minimal as is the enablement of the participant.

6. Seen in this light **current meeting procedures themselves constitute a principal obstacle to social change** at least for the meetings in which this is a preoccupation.

7. The challenge would therefore appear to be to elaborate a new conceptual framework within which a meeting may be perceived. This should highlight the hitherto hidden dimensions of the problem and clarify more appropriate options. For unless a new attitude to the meeting process can be elaborated, it seems highly probable that concealed inherent weaknesses will continue to undermine and erode the value for social change of any meeting outcome. In a very real sense **meetings model collective (in)ability to act and the (in)effectiveness of collective action.**

8. An important question then is how to mature the power of a meeting to :

- **reflect** the complexity of the external environment in an ordered manner (representation), to reflect about that environment (conceptual processes), and to reflect about itself (self-reference or self-reflexiveness);
- **focus** the variety of perspectives represented, without destroying it in some simplistic formula of superficial consensus;
- **transform** the issues presented, and the organizational groups which take responsibility for them, into new configurations of operational significance;
- **act**, or empower those represented to act, in the light of the level of understanding achieved during the meeting.

9. The task is therefore to discover of nature of the « complete meeting » of the future, through which a new order may be brought into being.

CLARIFICATION

1. This collection of topics, and the exploratory process with which it is associated, is **not** concerned with large-group meetings or conferences which are :

- organized according to **procedures** considered reasonably satisfactory by most of those directly involved, possibly on the basis of experience of previous meetings in the same series;
- deliberately structured, by the instigators to achieve a certain **objective**, irrespective of the individual preoccupations of those who choose to participate under such circumstances;
- conceived around a pre-defined set of **topics**, irrespective of any other topics which may emerge during the meeting as common to a number of participants present;
- deliberately unstructured, as an environment for spontaneous exchange between participants, but without any concern that such exchanges should lead to the emergence of some larger pattern.

2. Attention is only given to the « mechanics » of meeting organization (covered in the many books available on such matters) in so far as they directly affect the psycho-social dynamic of the meeting.

3. This topic procedure provides a means of collecting together ideas which may be helpful in different ways to different people according to their meeting experience. It is to be expected that a given participant will find some portion of the topic sheets to be partially or totally irrelevant to perceived needs.

4. This collection does not attempt to elaborate any single solution to the problems identified or to advocate a particular approach. Alternative methods are already in use for some of them. Reference to these will be made whenever appropriate to the case of large-groups (i.e. in excess of 15 to 30 persons).

5. So little attention has been given to the psycho-social dynamics of large-group meetings (particularly of the international, interdisciplinary variety), that many of the topics can only be identified and explored **tentatively** or even **speculatively**. None of the remarks should therefore be considered **conclusive**. The major concern is to stimulate open-ended reflection - accepting the necessity of risking error. Hopefully this may facilitate a breakthrough into a new understanding of participation in large-group meetings and **practical possibilities for their improved organization in the future.**

6. This is **not** an « academic » exercise. It is an effort by participants in international meetings (including concerned academics) to explore whatever knowledge, experience and insight seems useful to the improvement of the conference process.

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