REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW AGORAS PROJECT:
A REPORT ON A FUSCHL CONVERSATION

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September 17, 2005

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Abstract

The New Agoras Project is the result of the leadership of Bela H. Banathy in encouraging ideal-seeking conversations in many venues, including the Fuschl conversations held for several years in Fuschl, Austria, under the sponsorship of the International Federation for Systems Research. In April 2002 one of the conversations in Fuschl was devoted to the New Agoras Project. Doug Walton and Patricia Gill had participated in earlier meetings on the New Agoras Project and so led the conversation. The co-authors of this paper were new to discussions of the New Agoras Project but were familiar with other similar efforts in several countries. This paper is a reflection on the conversation that occurred in Fuschl. It compares the New Agoras Project with the work of the Institute of Cultural Affairs and lists websites and other work that we believe are related to the intent of the New Agoras Project.

Keywords: Agoras, evolutionary systems design, group facilitation, syntegration

The New Agoras Project

The New Agoras Project is a form of discursive organization proposed by Banathy (2000). The International Federation for Systems Research (IFSR) Fuschl Conversation in 2002 afforded an opportunity for nurturing what is at times called a "steward agora." A steward agora is one of three types of evolutionary design communities that are constituent elements of the New Agoras Project. Although steward agoras have occurred in other contexts, the Fuschl 2002 conversation provided an occasion for inquiry in a multicultural group.

The members of the Agora team came from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Germany, Poland, Colombia, and the USA. The team members also had different academic and experiential backgrounds. Some were educators, while others were consultants and information technology managers. As might be expected, the ensemble was promptly embroiled in a quagmire of ambiguous and tradition-laden meanings that is common in the initial phases of a conversation community. As this paper will demonstrate, these differences were gradually narrowed, so that the team was eventually able to make a contribution to the evolving definition of a steward agora.

Reflections on the New Agoras Project

The first phase of an intensive design conversation usually entails *generative dialogue*. In generative dialogue, there is no agenda or topic; individuals seek to find common ground on the basis of shared values, perceptions and worldviews. Finding this common ground is an essential starting point for design. During the Fuschl 2002 conversation, the members of the Agora team constructed common ground by discussing their research interests. A history of The Agora Project was then provided, and vigorous discussion followed, covering such major themes as the meaning of conscious evolution, Banathy's evolutionary design methodology, and other similar transformation and design methodologies.

The presentation about The Agora Project described the ideas that emerged from Banathy's (2000) proposal for the guided evolution of society and subsequent work by Banathy and others during the 2000 and 2001 Asilomar Conversation Conferences. One of the key outcomes of those conversations was a rough *systemic structure* of *new agoras*, which drew metaphorical connection to the Ancient Greek public discussions of 500 to 600 B. C. The basic structure of the new agoras is outlined below.

- *Local Level*. The local agora is the fundamental grouping of a New Agora. It is a small group of individuals who are interested in creating a common, ideal future together. The local agora meets frequently face-to-face. Ideally, the group would have an *agora steward*, who brings well-developed skills for building agoras and conducting social systems design. This individual helps develop the evolutionary competence and literacy of the agora.

- *Steward Level*. The stewards of each local agora form a "second level" agora. This steward agora enables the exchange of ideas among local agoras. Steward agoras also meet regularly, face-to-face.

- *Linkage Level*. The Linkage Level is the "top" of the structure. This activity exists primarily in cyberspace where agora groups can exchange ideas with each other, even though they are for the most part geographically separated. Within this top level are the technological systems and tools required to facilitate large-scale ideal image development, consensus, and action planning.

This structure is intended to support dialogue in the public sphere. Each of the different levels performs particular functions and interacts with the others in a flexible fashion. Thus, whereas the Ancient Greek agoras were a physical public space located in the center of town, the current global society, having grown too large for a similar meeting place, must meet in part in a virtual network.

Banathy's (2000) proposal for the guided of evolution of society encourages citizens to focus on the place of humanity in cultural evolution and the impacts that decisions made today will have on the future. There was agreement about following Banathy's proposal. Although the assumption that we can design a better world was initially challenged, the discussion led to the conclusion that we do not design a new society but create it through our actions. The group was comfortable with following Bohm's contention that in order

to change society, people must become more connected to their inner essence (Bohm, 1997).

In the guided evolution of society, inquiring communities, or local agoras, engage in evolutionary systems design as a way to envision a tentative ideal vision of the future. This vision entails creating a coherent model of future society in all its dimensions, including spiritual, cultural, political, economic, and social. Evolutionary systems designers also consider historical processes and consider the change of values over time. The deepest level of societal change implies also changing values. Innovative societies are those that are able to change their values. Thus, the purpose of inquiring communities formed along the lines of the New Agoras Project should be to transcend their existing assumptions and seek to create a new ideal vision of future society.

During the discussion, the team developed a more specific definition of a local agora, as follows:

- Comprises 7-12 people who can meet together on an on-going basis;
- Has the intention of creating an image of the "ideal" future society, which they would like to inhabit;
- Employs a design methodology to create the image;
- Includes one or more stewards, who provide design literacy and competence and guide the team in its different stages;
- Ensures availability of systemic methodologies to facilitate discussion in the public sphere.

Method and Results of the Fuschl 2002 Team

The Fuschl team agreed to use a design inquiry method based on evolutionary systems design (Banathy, 2000). The method involved five steps: (1) definition of purpose, (2) identification of values, (3) definition of services and clients, (4) definition of functions, and (5) next steps (Walton, 2002).

Definition of Purpose

The discussion around purpose involved the recognition that many organizations throughout the world are engaged in similar activities. Therefore, the New Agoras Project should focus not only on "creating" New Agoras but also on discovering and linking existing types of institutions, communities and organizations so that they develop actions in a context coherent with the definition below. From this understanding, the group defined its objective as:

> "Creating a community that collects and promotes the experiences of existing communities or organizations that have been successful in developing participative dialogue for achieving meaningful and valuable results and progress toward a better society within the context of (a) making available the best of each

local agora's knowledge, wisdom, and consciousness and (b) moving toward becoming a steward system that links to the best of systems thinking ideas."

Identification of Values

Having defined its purpose, the group developed a set of shared values.

- Exchange knowledge: Pay attention to environmental and ecological factors and sustainability. Support a system for resolving conflicts. Promote learning and adaptability.
- Create knowledge: Work on self-transformation and growth. Seek ideals. Move toward something better. Participate in planning and decision-making.
- Create an open environment for critique: Conduct iterative, continuous improvement and transformation. Promote open-mindedness, innovation, questioning, and non-violence.
- *Respect local and global and cultural wisdom: Encourage harmony, equity, tolerance, and diversity.*
- Use available knowledge and inquiry: Be aware of culture, natural resources, social injustice, and ethical responsibilities. Information should be accessible in terms of technology, language, navigation, and settings.
- Promote cultural exchange and access to knowledge and cultural resources: Permit free dialogue. Be aware of limitations due to language differences.
- Adopt an evolutionary consciousness: Be aware of the impact of decisions on future generations. Every decision is a selection in the evolutionary process. "Not to decide is to decide." Add value and make balanced contributions.

Definition of Services and Clients

The next step in the methodology entailed defining the services that the steward community would offer, as well as who would produce those services and the measures of performance. The team members identified the services that this steward community would offer as:

- Developing an Internet supported knowledge base on the linked agoras' experience.
- Facilitating the learning process from agoras by making available methods and tools for supporting conscious evolutionary design.
- Facilitating knowledge sharing and learning among interested communities or institutions.

The "clients" for these services would be community activists and organizers; institutions developing efforts related to the agoras' purposes including managers, consultants and technicians; concerned citizens; and researchers in fields similar to the systems community.

The doers, defined as the creators or animators of the steward community, would include (a) the members of this team as well as their friends and students; (b) a website administrator; (c) self-organized communities or institutions wanting to share their knowledge and experience in developing themselves according to the concept of evolutionary systems design; and (d) the members of the local steward's groups and experts in developing the main services.

Definition of Functions

In order to move toward an organization able to deliver these services, an initial set of functions would be performed by the steward agora as a team.

Develop an Internet based Knowledge Base on the Agoras' Experiences and Learning
The intent is to develop an information system to support the agoras, to collect feedback on the information system and to continually improve it. The content of the knowledge base would be, initially, short descriptions of other websites and other organizations working on group process methods. The knowledge base would include information on conscious evolution, social change, social systems design, community and organizational learning and development, participation and democratic decision-making. There would be an effort to select information coming from experienced agoras in terms of appropriateness, relevance of the experience, and accuracy of the information. The information would be presented in an easy to use format.

Support the Learning Process in Agoras with Useful Methods and Tools
It would be helpful to collect frameworks and methods that have proven useful for communities or institutions that could be considered aligned to the New Agoras purposes. We would search for information on useful methods and tools for developing the Agoras' actions, organization, and resources. We would seek to structure this work as a formal research project and find funding. We would encourage other groups to perform related functions.

Facilitate Knowledge Sharing and Learning by Interested Communities or Institutions
Designing and operating a communication agenda means managing email lists, communicating to and inviting participants, and facilitating sharing of experience and knowledge among the linked communities or institutions. We would endeavor to support research about dialogue and democratic processes. We would support participants when they are dealing with learning obstacles and structural difficulties. We would facilitate cultural exchange in order to improve the base of multi-cultural knowledge, develop ways to overcome language differences and the accessibility of local knowledge to the public domain. We would convert from legacy (non electronic) formats to the knowledge base.

Additionally, to aid self-organisation, a set of performance or quality measures was proposed. These included: a checklist for describing and evaluating each method, recording the number of hits, monitoring the amount of information exchanged, and measuring agora activities and performance.

Next Steps

Finally, the team identified a set of actions needed to continue developing the design after the conference. The team settled on the following *list of actions* for the future, aiming at continuing the development of the steward community.

- Continue to define the functions and the structure of functions, moving toward the eventual goal of instantiating a human activity system for gathering the information and making the information available via a website.
- Develop a research proposal to obtain the necessary resources.
- Explore potential linkages to other Steward Agoras and related social system design activities.

The report on the Fuschl Conversation includes some advances in terms of defining functions, and the structure of the steward team, as well as a more advanced version of the team actions and the organisation required to support development of the formal research proposal (Bazewick, *et al.*, 2002).

Achievements

After the April 2002 Fuschl Conversation there was progress in exploring potential linkages to other Steward Agoras and related systems design activities by some members of the group, particularly by Doug Walton and the authors. These actions included improving linkages with:

- Asilomar team 1, which has developed a comprehensive set of generic functions for steward agoras;
- Asilomar team 2, which has devised a system for the web-based implementation of a Q&A system about the New Agoras;
- Other Fuschl teams: Some teams have suggested the possibility of linkage;
- The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA): Over the past thirty years, ICA has created methods for supporting community development based on extensive research and experimentation (Umpleby & Oyler, 2003).

A Comparison with the Institute of Cultural Affairs

Stuart Umpleby felt that the purposes of the New Agoras Project, as described in Fuschl in April 2002, were very similar to the work that the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) undertook beginning in the 1970s. (Umpleby and Oyler, 2003) Hence, a comparison of the New Agoras Project (NAP) with the work of ICA might be helpful in identifying what is unique about both NAP and ICA. Perhaps the NAP could learn from those who have gone before, and perhaps the NAP could advance more rapidly by joining forces with some of the current ICA activities. This assumes that the purposes of the two

organizations are very similar. If the two groups were to become aware of each other, they could decide what they can learn from each other or do together.

Table 1 is the work of Stuart Umpleby and Doug Walton. Umpleby created a first draft as a way of understanding the NAP in comparison with ICA. Walton added additional material to the table.

The New Agoras Project	The Institute of Cultural Affairs
Started in the 1980s or 1990s.	Started in the 1970s, based on work in the 1950s and 1960s.
Origin was in a school of education, Bela Banathy's work at the Saybrook Institute.	Origin was in the World Council of Churches, the University of Texas, and Garrett Theological Seminary. A key leader was Joe Mathews.
Intent is to encourage people to take responsibility for the direction of cultural evolution and guide human progress toward a sustainable and consensual future. Emphasis is not on fixing the current system but on imagining and creating a new one that is (relatively) free of the contextual assumptions that underlie the present one. The underlying values are based on sustainable societal evolution, not any explicit theology. Imagining an ideal future is just one method, discussed below.	Intent is to help the poorest of the poor and to build communities, that is, live the teachings of *The Bible*, but through secular, not religious, activities.
The supporting literature is from the fields of education, evolutionary theory (Jantsch, Laszlo), psychology, organizational development, and creativity, as well as systems science (Ulrich, Bertalanffy, Jackson, Miller, Boulding, and others).	The supporting literature is a mixture of secular (e.g., K. Boulding, M. Mead) and religious writers (e.g., S. Kirkegaard, P. Tillich).
A goal is to share ideas developed in agora conversations via a knowledge base on the internet.	Develop methods that people around the world can use to define their visions and work to achieve them.
Encourage people to intentionally work together to imagine and design an ideal future society. The dominant meta-methodology is Evolutionary Systems Design, which involves: a) transcending the state or the existing system; b) envisioning an image of the system; c) designing the system that transforms the existing system to the ideal state; d) displaying the models of the system that was designed; e) planning for the implementation of the design. As a point of comparison, phases (a) to (d) would correspond to the "vision" and (e) to the rest. There may be two keys to understand the differences: 1) the envisioning of the ideal state, and 2) the modeling of it prior to deciding on an action and using that model to guide action and further understanding.	A multi-step brainstorming and planning activity: vision (What do we want to see in place in five years?), obstacles (What are the obstacles that prevent achieving the vision?), strategies (What strategies will remove the obstacles?), actions (What actions are needed to implement the strategies?), implementation schedule (What actions will be taken during each quarter of the coming year?).
Assumes that new visions of what is possible will lead to actions to achieve reforms. Seeks to link up multiple groups to form a whole society pursuit. Further, assumes that those persons who will inhabit the future system have the ethical right to be involved in its design.	Assumes that a group working together can accomplish things that individuals cannot. So lead the group through the planning process after defining the shared vision and the obstacles to achieving the vision.
An emphasis on imagining ideal worlds and thinking about cultural evolution.	A combination of "images of possibility" and "learning by doing" using participation methods and working on community improvement projects.

There are three levels of participation: the local level, the steward level, and the linkage level.	There are people in communities and organizations, ICA full-time staff, and volunteers who help with projects.
A steward group of facilitators is needed to lead the various agoras. The Steward groups have been growing out of the annual Asilomar Conversation Conference and conferences of the Saybrook Graduate School.	The members of ICA met each summer in Chicago to review methods, strategies, and programs. The International Association of Facilitators, an offshoot of ICA, meets annually.
Largely self-financed as a part-time activity of academics. There has been some support from IFSR.	Financial support from churches, individuals, government, and foundations.
Individual agoras are self-funded. Leaders are volunteers.	Funding has been received from UNESCO, the World Bank, corporations, government agencies, and individuals. Early work was more "missionary-like", later work is more "NGO-like."
Stewards are the resource people.	Local resource people, who provide skills, equipment, and contacts, are involved in planning sessions led by facilitators.
Some articles, books, dissertations.	Quite a few books, many, many newsletters and press articles, some journal articles and websites.
The Asilomar Conversations and the Fuschl Conversations have resulted from these efforts.	ICA activities have led to the creation of many community organizations, day-care centers, health clinics, and small businesses around the world.
Primarily an intellectual exercise.	The intent is to improve the quality of life by encouraging and enabling the involvement of people in improving their communities.
Well connected to the academic community, especially the field of education.	Widely known among churches, NGOs, and development institutions, such as the World Bank.
A few methods, focusing primarily on conversations defining ideal circumstances, most importantly involving evolutionary, systems design (Banathy, 1996) applied to the system of cultural evolution. Dialogue and conversation occurs through the Evolutionary Systems Design (ESD) methodology. The ESD modeling process involves envisioning, generation of alternatives, evaluation, and modeling that can incorporate numerous other well established techniques (i.e., brainstorming, nominal group technique, Delphi process, heart-storming, as well as implementation and strategic planning methodologies). This can structure highly complex socio-technical design problems that are pursued and changed over time.	Methods are developed for enhancing participation, community development, strategic planning, "re-imaging" people through conversations, raising awareness, leading workshops, etc.
Not much writing on what results have been achieved so far. Some people are encouraged by the conversations they have participated in.	A great deal of writing about results—project descriptions, evaluations of projects for funding agencies (e.g., effects on employment, average incomes, education, health), stories and anecdotes.

Table 1. Comparing the New Agoras Project with the Institute of Cultural Affairs

Reflections on the New Agoras Project

Other Efforts and their Websites

Success of a networking or knowledge-sharing endeavor depends in part on one's partners or allies. Below is a list of links to groups and resources that seem particularly promising for the New Agoras Project.

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation is described at http://thataway.org/index.html. They have a glossary of dialogue and deliberation terms and methods. The organizer, Sandy Heierbacher, pulls together people working on diversity, community building, organizational development, deliberative democracy, public participation, conflict resolution, healing and transformation, education, meeting facilitation, etc. The website has a list of resources and current events and initiatives.

Dynamic Facilitation, http://www.tobe.net, offers a method to facilitate small groups of people to face difficult issues creatively and collaboratively. To see how the method has been used in corporations, cities, and associations, see http://www.wisedemocracy.org. For a book on the subject see Jim Rough, *Society's Breakthrough*, at http://www.societysbreakthrough.com.

The new Mary Parker Follett Foundation, http://www.follettfoundation.org is gathering financial resources to support participatory design of social systems, dialogue as community reflection, and evolutionary inquiry.

The Deliberative Democracy Consortium, http://www.deliberative-democracy.net, is a professional affiliation of researchers and practitioners working on the growing movement for deliberative democracy.

The United Nations Global Compact, http://www.unglobalcompact.org, is building a network of corporations pledged to abide by ten principles – two from the UN Declaration on Human Rights, four on labor standards, three on the environment, and one opposing corruption. The Learning Forum involves universities in writing case studies. This effort could be the beginning of a new way of regulating the global economy through study, discussion, and networking.

An invaluable source in the field is Tom Atlee's Co-Intelligence Institute, http://www.co-intelligence.org and http://www.democracyinnovations.org. Most of the links above came from Tom Atlee's list serve.

The Institute for 21st Century Agoras was established to support and follow-up the meeting of the ISSS in Crete in July 2003. See www.globalagoras.org.

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Related Research Traditions

The team discussed a variety of other literature and schools of thought that seemed to be related to the New Agoras Project. The current understanding of how knowledge is constructed, which has been described in the literature on Second Order Cybernetics (or "constructivism") was suggested as important background. A constructivist approach to learning would support understanding of the community learning process happening in the New Agoras. To get a deeper understanding of social organizations from the perspectives of learning and communication, the Organisational Cybernetics approach offers the Viable System Model (Beer, 1981). For additional references on participation methods and connections to the systems literature see Umpleby (1970, 1972, 1981, 1983, 1986, 1994).

Other scientific disciplines and existing systems design methodologies, such as Organizational Behaviour and Development and Organizational Learning were suggested to support understanding of organizational transformation and participatory processes. The team also proposed to take into account some systemic and cybernetic methodologies and techniques that have proven useful in similar contexts, like the following:

- Design architecture to build a knowledge base, resulting from a community of enquiries producing a shared model;
- ICA methods for community development;
- The viable systems model (VSM) to support design of agora-like organizations and Syntegration to support democratic agreements on shared ideals;
- Open Space methods for supporting democratic decision making processes;
- Techniques such as narrative inquiry for changing organizations within a context of equity and diversity instead of power imposition.

The next section explains in more detail one of these systemic approaches that the authors believe has particular value for supporting the New Agora's Project.

Team Syntegrity

Team Syntegrity is a theoretical model and group facilitation method based on a non-hierarchical protocol that facilitates participation and dialog among people holding diverse views that are equally legitimate. The purpose is to organize co-operation among a group of people by integrating, through structured dialogue, their knowledge and experience on a particular issue of interest to all of them. (Beer, 1994)

In his work on the Viable System Model, Beer highlighted the need of most organizations to develop conversational tools to facilitate the emergence of social consciousness, in particular when making complex decisions involving large numbers of people. A viable organization needs to balance the views of those with environmental knowledge with the views of those managing organizational tasks. It can do this by using structured conversations and information management tools such as Team Syntegrity. Team

syntegrity establishes conditions permitting all viewpoints to be expressed and taken into account.

The method, based on the structure of an icosahedron, supports policy formulation and decision-making processes in a participative, non-hierarchical way. It begins with an "infoset" - a group of people sharing information and knowledge on a particular issue of concern. It promotes collaboration by designing the teams' organization and agenda as well as the context for developing the conversation in each team and by balancing tension between and integration of multiple viewpoints. The procedure aids the circulation of information and knowledge and generates new "reverberating" synergistic knowledge (Espinosa, 2003).

Extensive use of the Team Syntegrity method has demonstrated that it is particularly useful for supporting teamwork related to planning, innovation and knowledge acquisition (Schwaninger, 1997). Team Syntegrity is also useful for integrating the implicit knowledge and experience in the minds of those working to solve a problem or to find agreement on an important public concern (Pfiffner, 2001; Stadelman, 2001). More than a hundred successful applications of Team Syntegrity provide clear evidence of its effectiveness as a tool to produce democratic agreements among participants from an organisation or network of organisations (http://www.team-syntegrity.com accessed 31 January 2005). Most reported experiences show that a Syntegration is a truly participatory method that provides a good context for reaching agreements and achieving mutual understanding (Espinosa, 2004).

There have also been experiments on using the method for developing shared knowledge or for structuring learning networks. The Festschrift project to honor Stafford Beer on his seventieth birthday was structured through a Syntegration and later resulted in a CD co-written by the infoset about the impact of Organizational Cybernetics (Espejo and Schwaninger, 1997). Lincoln University recently developed a research project through the Systems and Information Society Network (SISN). The project uses Team Syntegrity as a way to coordinate work on several papers and the outputs from a network of researchers and practitioners. The method has been useful for developing educational courses in specific fields (Espinosa, 2000) and for developing knowledge networks (see www.itsy.co/staffordian). Team Syntegrity has also been used to develop long-term shared visions. (Espinosa, 2003)

A method like Team Syntegrity is likely to be of particular help for organizations like the New Agoras Project, or Evolutionary Learning Communities (ELC), wanting to develop a shared view of their preferred values, purposes, action paths or desired futures. It might even be used in electronic meetings, via the Internet and the web, to create virtual meetings as the conversational context for agreements. Beer himself supported the World Governance Project in 1993 thinking that in order to deal with global problems "the ideal situation would be to see a proliferation of self-organized mini-parliaments (or infosets) of world citizens where Syntegrity is used to organize infosets as a total democracy" (White, 1994).

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In order to implement the agreements of a Syntegration in the context of a network of agoras or ELCs, other systemic approaches might be helpful. The Viable System Model offers a language particularly useful for defining the structural and networking arrangements required for implementing an organization's policies. Evolutionary communities can be interpreted from the perspective of viability offered by this cybernetic approach. The VSM could probably contribute to the design and operation of the learning networks of evolutionary communities, helping them to develop social consciousness and improve their self-regulatory skills. A cybernetic tool like Team Syntegrity offers potential for developing the democratic context for co-evolutionary learning networks (Espinosa, 2004).

Summary of Reflections

The Fuschl 2002 conversation on the New Agoras Project brought together a diverse group of individuals. It demonstrated that, by applying the principles of group dynamics and systems design, people can construct common ground from which to work toward an improved society. The emerging description of the New Agoras Project provides a framework from which to proceed using iterative systems design principles as well as other systemic tools.

By comparing the NAP with an existing agora-like organisation, the ICA, we discovered important aspects that experience shows are relevant in using systemic tools for supporting evolutionary communities. Clearly, the systems and cybernetics community can offer multiple approaches and tools to support democratic decision-making and community development in agreed directions. The implementation of actions is more complex than the formulation of plans or visions, as the ICA experience shows. Other agora-like organisations also provide instruction, for example the UN Global Compact or the Co-intelligence Institute.

A crucial difference between the current vision and strategies of NAP and examples like those mentioned is that while NAP has been an intellectual exercise for academics, the ICA seeks to improve the quality of life in poor communities by encouraging and enabling people to be more involved with their communities. ICA therefore faces more complex challenges by supporting actual communities rather than discussion groups. We can consider ICA's model villages as evolutionary learning communities or viable systems. Each way of seeing them brings new tools to support the design and implementation of improvements. Furthermore, the Critical Systems Approach offers tools for making informed choices about the systemic tools required to support each stage of development of an agora. A good example of the application of this approach to support agora-like organizations is the work of Moreno and Cardenas (2003).

To advance to the next step, the NAP may decide to support both design and implementation of agoras, integrating knowledge and experiences by using tools that have proven to be useful in similar situations. Still missing are explicit steps toward development of the required communities of knowledge and their assembly into a

network with adequate support. Identifying academics and practitioners who are willing to be members of this community and identifying a set of useful tools would make NAP capable to support evolutionary learning communities.

Conclusion

The New Agoras Project (NAP) is an idea that may prove to be a very significant development within the system sciences. NAP has increased discussion within the International Society for the Systems Sciences (ISSS) of group facilitation methods and how they can be used both to improve society and to connect the systems sciences to practice. However, currently there seems to be a gap within NAP between goals and actions. Although the intent is to involve many people in many countries in discussions of ideal future worlds, so far most of the conversations have been among academics in the US and Europe. The work that has been done on NAP has been thought provoking for those involved. But the absence of a plan to reach out beyond the academic community raises questions about the stated purpose. The gap between vision and action seems particularly wide when NAP is compared with ICA, which has conducted participatory planning meetings in thousands of communities and organizations around the world. To prevent confusion or disillusionment, perhaps either the vision or the strategy needs to be modified.

Clearly NAP needs to develop its vision as a supportive network for evolutionary communities, offering knowledge and information on systemic approaches for designing and implementing projects. It also needs to network with other agora-like organisations and steward groups. NAP needs a clear statement in its mission to "create a community that collects and promotes the experiences of existing communities and organizations that have been successful in developing participative dialogue for achieving meaningful and valuable results and progress toward a better society." In practice, this means:

- Developing in parallel both the steward community and the agoras;
- Emphasizing a "learning by doing" approach for agora-like organizations;
- Including other systemic methodologies for enhancing participation, community development, strategic planning, "re-imaging" people through conversations, raising awareness, leading workshops, etc.;
- Supporting the use of participation methods to generate agreements on community improvements and implementation schedules;
- Continuing to develop the NAP network and knowledge base through the Internet, as well as holding occasional face-to-face meetings.

The NAP may refocus its strategy towards becoming a steward system that organizes and makes available information and knowledge on issues that experience shows to be of value for developing agora-like organizations. For improved performance, particularly in the first stages of development, it might be helpful to focus NAP on a strategic sector. For example, NAP might decide to acknowledge its base among educators and choose to

focus on developing the global network of universities as a foundation for community improvement (Umpleby and Shandruk, 2003).

We expect that the existing members of the NAP will carry on developing its purposes and consolidating its resources for converting NAP into a formal research project with the necessary support for developing the steward community and the knowledge repository. If this work continues, in the medium term there will be a Steward Community producing the expected services through the Internet and occasional workshops and meetings and communities of practice learning and reporting on their experiences as evolutionary communities and the usefulness of particular tools.

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