Report on the coordinators' meeting of the Citizens' Assemblies

Under the patronage of the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation, on 18 - 19 June 2008 about twenty participants coming from all over the world met in Paris, to discuss their willingness to organize "regional citizens' assemblies". There were two days of debates and dialogue for sharing their objectives, questions and to interrogate each other about the profound sense of this type of initiative. They also had the opportunity to present an outline of their action programmes.

RETURNING TO THE ORIGINS

5 projects of regional assemblies in continuity with a world assembly and continental assemblies of the Alliance for a responsible, plural and solidary world

In December 2001, the World Citizens' Assembly was held in Lille (France). It was preceded by five continental meetings in June 2001, among many other demonstrations. The Lille Assembly was an initiative that brought together more than 400 participants from varied professional, geographical and social origins, and a new dialogue was expected to strike up between the representatives of the whole planet. In the last instance, there was willingness to collectively imagine new forms of regulations in order to overcome multiple and complex problems that appear on a world scale and their undeniable local consequences. It was a demonstration conceived as a starting point for federated dynamics at world level. Three important advances were achieved there: Adopting a Letter on Human Responsibilities, drafting an Agenda for the 21st Century, which included the necessary conditions for drawing up an action plan geared to consolidating an uninhabitable regional and sustainable planet and the proposal to implement citizens' assemblies.

Within this framework, five initiatives were outlined for five geographical areas: Europe, the Mediterranean, the Southern Cone of America and the Sahel Sahara region, each with its own problems, its individual context and its view on what should be a regional citizens assembly.

Why organize regional citizens' assemblies?

To begin with, an initial verification: there is no world scale political community. The concept of a concert of nations has not provided the expected results. Its institutions (the UNO, the World Bank or the FMI) have not managed to restore lasting peace nor prevent economic and financial crises, largely because every

country, and specially the most powerful ones, have let their national interests prevail over those of the planet. The division of human communities across frontiers - and this was stated unanimously by all the participants at the meeting in June 2008 at the FPH - reflects less and less the nature of the world's interdependences. This generates an enormous amount of diplomatic or economic relations in which citizens no longer feel reflected, although not for the fact that on this occasion the economic or political rules precede the construction of a feeling of citizenship among the populations.

The answer to the question "why organize regional citizens' assemblies?" then seems to be evident: as instituted communities do not guarantee the appropriation of a common project on behalf of its inhabitants, the vocation of such assemblies let the groups of citizens assume the challenges of society, feeling that they have the right and the duty to understand them and pronounce an opinion upon this subject.

The challenges: overcome contradictions

However, once the objectives have been raised, it is just a matter of seeing how to achieve them. A vast series of problems appears here:

How to bring to life new destination communities as opposed to the already instituted collectivities?

How to build unity when the world is, before anything else, a mosaic of cultures, national identities or social castes?

How to establish relations on an equal basis when history was built on domination and power relations?

How to promote a governing system that does not disintegrate today into just divisions and the promotion of clans or of the elite?

How to mobilize populations that, even though they are not recognized in the established systems, help to perpetuate them?

An obstinate response to these questions: meet together, integrate, and articulate.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF PAST EXPERIENCES IN ORDER TO RE-CREATE THE FUTURE

Rest on what has already been achieved

Recent history is marked by experiences upon which it is important to rest in order to capture their strengths and weaknesses. Two initiatives were highlighted on the matter:

<u>- The example of the Asian forum for solidary economy</u>

This particularly enlightening initiative gave rise to much enthusiasm. Originally, we found confirmation from the expectations of town inhabitants. One of them referred to the need for economic emancipation. In reply to this expectation, workgroups were formed that included institutions, inhabitants, financial organisms, etc, … after which projects were organized where each could be involved in their own way: small savers agreed to entrust their savings to the bank, bankers agreed to offer favourable interest rates and businessmen expressed their wish to start socially responsible projects. The objective is now to expand this experience: towards other matters, such as fair housing, but also towards other geographical areas.

<u>- Citizens' panels in Europe</u>

The objective of this project was to put weight on the decisions of the European Commission through regrouping individuals who put forward their proposals on matters concerning rurality and agriculture. It was an ambitious process that has still have not become totally fruitful, but the experience given to the modalities of organizing citizens in various regions of Europe was extremely interesting. Good ideas mature slowly. It is indispensable for established powers to recognize them: administrations, lobbys, etc. This panel showed itself to be to good prototype and should be cultivated from now on.

Avoid repeating mistakes made in the past

A trap, which everyone recognizes, is that of looking for a legitimacy excluding other institutions. It is a trap that many NGOs could not avoid, criticizing States or institutions but adopting their same practices (depending on the suppliers of foreign funds, for example, the lack of transparency, etc.).

By extension, is it not also the same trap that can lead to stagnating such a marvellous initiative as the Social World Forum? By becoming increasingly more related to platforms where traditional forces (political parties, trade unions) try to increase their audience, does this not run the risk of losing every chance of being successful?

What can then be said about the experience of participative democracy, which is always consultative but not decisional?

Globally, the systems set up to manage and organize life in society have left the most humble out on to limb. Populations are impotent when faced with territorial classifications or colonization. Even free election (voting) can be seen to be

hampered by barriers (poverty, corruption, etc.), without taking into consideration the frontiers that generated divisions (destination communities broken in this way). Therefore, new mechanisms must be found to involve citizens and turn them into exchange players.

Imagine new forms of expression

Citizens' assemblies have by vocation to reinvent processes to give them a new sense, a new opportunity, the need of joining citizens together: putting the individual as well as society into the first row at the same time, converting them into co-authors and co-actors of a new world and of this assembly that will be their source of inspiration. These assemblies will only make full sense when initiatives from populations are liberated and confronted with constituted forces. Moreover, this can only be achieved by federating them around new ethics and new ways of doing things. These common values shall be the driving force of the assemblies, which will bring together the will to overcome domineering logic, the capitalist market economy that claims to reduce the general interest to the sum (impossible) of individual interests.

WHAT FORMAT SHOULD WE GIVE TO THESE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES?

Who are these citizens? All of us!

Citizenship demands economic, social cultural and conditions that were often denied and continue to be so and, at present, it is nothing other than a construction based on nationality. The assemblies that are outlined should shine light on a new vision of citizenship: thinking of the future as a fully entitled actor, as an individual who is equal to others, with the aim of generating a collective process. Who will these citizens be then? Everyone who recognizes themselves as having these values and wants to be committed in this direction. A citizens' assembly must be made up of everyone, including all the constituted bodies, even the military. In this way, it will be a matter of leaving out relations of power. A member of Parliament, a businessman or a housewife will stand on equal terms. Down with any differences! Long live diversity! Southern countries should not be considered as guests but as participants, and their citizens will have to continue setting themselves free of their subordinated status.

Why meet? To act together!

The concept of assembly, although its objective should not be to solve an emergency, aspires to putting forward ideas, building initiatives and obtaining

results in order to bring about real changes. It cannot only be a simple place for dialogue, an ephemeral meeting or think tank. It cannot be merely irrigated by an objective for collective and sustainable action, so as not to run a rapid risk of desertion. On the other hand, although this community should be "instituting", it does not necessarily have to be institutionalized. However, beyond how it is shaped, we should not forget that an institution is firstly characterized by a series of regulations upon which a commitment is established. Therefore, there should be flexible assemblies adapted to various different territories (even when freedom of expression is restricted), and at the same time escaping from any type of dependence. A social movement that overcomes the logics of the system and at the same time is accepted by them: such is the challenge of the historical process that was started with these citizens' assemblies.

A process that must be tested, adapted to every case and shared mutually

Nobody can expect to have the right implementation method at these citizens' assemblies. It is a question of a process that is put to the test on a daily basis and that results in field experimentation. Consequently, every assembly shall be unique. Firstly because concepts do not express the same thing in every region. As opposed to these plural notions, it is highly necessary to innovate. And, as happens with any innovation, the result cannot be defined beforehand. Depending on the diversity of the stories and local contexts, every assembly will have to find its own appropriate formula. Therefore, it will be necessary to avoid a unique format or copying one process to another, nevertheless guaranteeing links between the initiatives, because each one can learn from the other, but also because territories are spaces of interaction: the Mediterranean, linked between Europe, Africa and the Middle East; the Maghrib cornered between Africa and Europe or Mauritania, which links Western Africa to the Maghrib.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR GIVING LIFE TO THESE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Going out to meet the individuals

First principle: everyone must be able to give their opinion, not only the thinkers and intellectuals who are distanced from basic realities. This must be started from the beginning of the process, so that each and everyone can feel they are participants. The assembly is also a new kind of movement. Therefore, the opinion of the people can be gathered going towards them. In the Mediterranean, it could be done via boats that approach ports, in Africa or in Latin America, by caravans that

cross cities and villages. And in Europe ... omnibus? Regarding the creation of an emulation between populations, everything has yet to be invented. The care that must be taken in this respect lies in not allowing this open door to expression to become a platform for formulating distress (for example, the "1789 complaints books" should rather be proposal notebooks).

Neither dependence nor rejection to its opening
The fact that everyone reinvents the world on his own account is of no interest whatsoever. Therefore, it is indispensable that the right to participate is made available to all. Even to the constituted forces, whose representatives will be welcome, on the condition that they appear as fully entitled individuals. So, if the "signs" are integrated as such to the processes, they will monopolize everything and exclude the citizens. Assemblies should therefore be kept independent and sovereign and not accept the agenda or the framework of a state or collectivity, for example, as a pretext because they are financed by them.

Not to appropriate the right of telling the truth
To do something for others but without those others is to do something against them. The citizens' assemblies shall therefore be that space for expression where priorities shall be defined collectively (based on problems of area) and not predefined by their predecessors. As spaces for meeting and recognition, these assemblies cannot become the property of some. Their vocation is not to appear as a sign that would self-proclaim the elite from the village. Thus, they will be accepted more readily by the constituted forces and shall not be considered as competition. So, two rules must be respected: not to tie things by force (to find the fair balance between organization and improvisation) and not to presage the result.

HORIZON 2010 and beyond

Before, during and after the event.
The short-term horizon for the 5 projects that were started by the citizens' assemblies has a first date that marks a stage: 2010. This will be the moment when members of these assemblies physically meet each other in their respective regions. It is not a question of assembling absolutely everybody in just one place. But 2010 is nothing more than a date, an occasion, and an ephemeral stage in the middle of a historic process. Then it will be necessary so do the following:
Before the event: Satisfy the conditions to implement these assemblies
During the assembly: Satisfy the conditions to continue the process

After the event: Satisfy the conditions to achieve results that have been fixed

2010: in the first place, the result of a process

Although it is important to set out the timing, setting objectives, this should not become an obstacle. In effect, what is essential continues to be building the process itself. That being said, depending on the more or less limiting contexts, the speed at which progress advances will necessarily be different. So that these assemblies make sense, they must be recorded over a long term, in duration. They cannot be reduced to a temporary regrouping, because they run the risk of appearing like useless effort or, even worse, of generating frustrations in the participants. Imposing a deadline would, in consequence, be a mistake.

Methods and tools to give projects body

Tools and methods will be useful to build and report on process, but also to create ties between the participants. There are many possibilities on hand: a collaboration web page that generates synthesis, a database for accumulating knowledge in a lasting and systematical way, spontaneous blogs, the video that gives force to testimonies, conceptual cartographs to interconnect ideas, diffusion lists, discussion forums, compilation of experiences, etc. But all kinds of innovation is possible, such as itinerant methodological schools for example, set up in Latin America from an initiative based on a constant learning process that does not try to impose learning but tries to gather innovations and spread local ideas. It is possible, but also advisable, since everyone has their own privileged methods of communication. In Africa, for example, word is the essential thing, whereas the written word is the language of the administration, of judges, of taxes, etc. Tools will therefore have to be adapted to territories, to cultures and to individuals.

Everyone on their way, but all in the same direction

But before thinking of 2010, let us not leave the principle that the concept of citizens' assembly was already defined. Far away from the stereotypes, each one will have its definition, which will have to be confronted with the others through a discussion platform. Why not do this as a web site that would link different experiences? A blank page on which, together, concepts and objectives could be built and where every experience will spread its initiatives to others. The important thing is to build a common crucible where everyone can take part and take advantage at their convenience. 2010 will therefore be more or less a founder stage, and of changeable geometry.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE START?

An attempt of definition to submit to debate?

A citizens' assembly is a new social process, participative and with the capacity for decision, called to institute a society in a territory defined by its inhabitants beyond national properties, including all components of society and with the will to influence future decisions. Its objective is to revolutionize where human beings live by organizing living communities.

Act One: Mobilize and convince

Firstly, it is a matter of swelling the ranks and of convincing that these initiatives are undeniably necessary. In this respect, everyone can act by communicating within their networks, taking advantage of forthcoming international meetings and generating in this way a debate concerning these projects for assemblies. Their success will depend on the capacity of their predecessors to get out and meet all the citizens. Getting already involved participants mobilized is a good test in order to then point them towards positive directions. So, although the process demonstrates that it makes sense, it is sophisticated and innovative in its course of action, it will only be efficient if citizens themselves listen to and adapt to it.

Be committed to taking a project forward into the future

As sponsors, the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation cannot and should not be the only bearer of the project. An initiative of this nature needs the participants to be committed to taking this project forward into the future. The basic inscription principle within the assembly process shall therefore be that of voluntary work. It is up to everyone to mobilize financial resources for starting the process and everybody will also have to feed it along its journey.

THE SOUTH AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Some parts of the context
- The territory and the players: a key triangle, 3 countries: Chile, Peru and Bolivia (but the Southern Cone also includes Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and even southern Brazil) and more than 40 social, popular and local organizations that are involved in this process
- An abyss that grows. In 1990, 135 million poor people. In 2000, 200 million. Related to poverty, inequality has also increased.
- Acute tension in Latin America between instituted power and the heavy demands of citizens for renewal of their institutions.
- Societies that each have their own codes of communication, in spite of sharing the same language
- Villages artificially regrouped within States.
- A diagnosis of crisis: ruptured confidence in the modernity, social and environmental crisis
- A civil deficit: there is no real citizenship (corruption, lack of representation)

Methodological axes
- Supported by the Letter of Human Responsibilities: absolute interdependence and respect for one another, exercise legitimate power only if it is put to the service of common rights, respecting the planet, etc.
- Develop the alliances and articulate them with the existing initiatives through regional theme meetings (matters concerning the sea, access to water, education, spirituality, alternative communication, etc.) or socio-professionals (young men and women, military people, women, religious people in charge, leaders of original peoples, etc.)
- Join together all the players (academicians, those responsible for education, social and cultural movements, municipalities and local power, migrants) concerning local or specific dynamics before facing a global assembly.
- A web site: the virtual support that proposes videos (experiences, meetings, etc.) and notebooks (reflection cards, methodological contributions, etc.)
- A magazine "Own Thought" [Pensamiento Propio] (issued quarterly), that gathers and elaborates theories and reflexions about Latin America.
- The central theme: peace, the essential element for the development of people and nations.

THE MEDITERRANEAN EXPERIENCE
Some parts of the context
- An area of contrasts: various political situations (dictatorships, constituted democracies, formal democracies), various cultures (European, Maghrebian, oriental).
- A very militarized area: armed conflicts, problems linked with immigration.
- One of the multiple challenges to be solved: citizenship in countries where citizens have no rights.
- A complex political area, multiple identities, where many people look towards different horizons from those of Europe (The Atlantic, Africa).
- An on-going process taken forward by the European Union, but that is too Eurocentric, recently relaunched by Nicolas Sarkozy. This process, which was based on three pillars (social development, cultural and political dialogue and free interchange), finally favoured the economic aspect over every other.

Methodological axes
The objective is to achieve that this assembly makes real political impact. The project is in the laboratory stage in order to create a permanent space for drawing up proposals. Two stages are outlined:
The creation of an international committee for the project (the CERAI and the FPH cannot support it alone) so that all the interested players can appropriate it with politicians, companies, social movements, etc., and thus prefigure a kind of driving committee.
Dynamics of meetings and workshops, working by themes, by colleges, etc., that requires a prior phase of socio-economic study and census of the present networks in the Mediterranean basin, as well as capitalization of the already existing work.

THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

Some parts of the context
- A crisis of parliamentary regimes and of political systems. The last mentioned are questioned because, in spite of opening up the borders – which supposedly was to solve everything-, the established powers have today not found a solution for the economic problems (particularly unemployment). The recent voting in Ireland (not for the constitution) is proof of this fear of losing social conquests.
- Political parties that have lost credibility, in favour of a "civil society" which does not solve the problem of individuals participating nor their legitimacy to represent the community.
- The existence of an institution on the scale of the approached territory, the European Union, whose deepening – blocked by the national executives and the exclusively economic considerations that direct it - should be relaunched.
- A profusion of European movements (associations, clubs, organizations, etc.). There is even a General Directorate of the European Union for citizenship and for culture. All these bodies are in a situation of competence for granting funds and the achievement of recognition.

Methodological axes
This will proceed through alliances, as confronting the instituted bodies, imitating them or acting as a lobby, would be a wasted effort. The foreseen stages are as follows:
Study of groups that work on citizenship (analysis and strategy of each). For example, through an envoy who interviews them.
A pretext to form coalition of promoters (negotiation to make individual dreams transform into a collective dream) that will jointly determine the format of the event.
Implication of the political players to guarantee a legitimacy for the process, integrating their elements of debate.
Taking advantage of the European elections to spread and share the idea of an instituting assembly.
Promotion of an information kit to spread it among as many people as possible.
Put experts and citizens together (a balance between what is wanted and what is possible)
Reaching an idea through consensus, or at least by majority.

THE EXPERIENCE SAHELOSAHARIANA

Some parts of the context
An area that includes the West of Senegal and the Horn of Africa. The territory of the project will be more limited: essentially the north of Senegal, Mauritania and the north of Mali, but opening into Burkina, Níger and the south periphery of the Maghrib.
A cultural coherence (Islam, multisecular interchanges born in the Sahara that was a passing route, the place where all the civilizations of the region were built and mixed together).
An area of conflicts (such as the region of the tuaregs of the North of Mali) and of political instability. The region is a vast expanse under dispute between the powers (The United States, France, Spain) and with tension between local powers and armed participants.
People with deep historical roots, but fragmented countries and, as a result, dismembered populations. A region sealed by the orality of culture.
The presence of oil that stirs foreign interests.
A strong procedure that is already underway: the Alliance to refound governing Africa. True dynamics that are multiplying and unfolding: civil assembly of Mali, Forum of the North for Peace, repercussions of the Social Maghrebian Forum, etc.

Methodological axes
- A need for geographically delimiting intervention
- To establish a diagnosis of the themes for approaching and identifying essential persons - resources and then to draw up strategies and action plans.
- To leave the parties and established organizations
- To build dynamics to help calm the tension thanks to the integration of populations in the governing process.

THE ASIAN EXPERIENCE

Some parts of the context
- A continent where the strong economic growth coexists with poverty the terrorism. Such as in India, a country of the NTIC, one of business and tourism, but also of the wretched settlements of Bombay: villas, shanties, slums, etc.
- A very tense military context and arduous diplomatic relations, especially with regard to high opposed political ideologies.
- A continent that amasses nearly half the planet's inhabitants (China + India = 1/3 of world population)
- 37 very heterogeneous and very remote countries, both culturally and geographically.

Methodological axes
- To make a wager for the youth people and on intergenerational dialogue in countries where youngsters represent 60% of the population.
- To approach federate concerns, such as sustainable development or education. It is indispensable to begin there, because the enormous diversity of the contexts require, on the one hand, discovering the other, before being able to face any political project.
- To begin bilateral or trilateral meetings (China - India Forum, China-India-Japan Forum, etc.) in order to extend this towards multilateral and then more widespread meetings later on.

- To mix forums and assemblies, then to join all these platforms in order to form an assembly of Asian citizens. This concerns forums the objectives of which are not to become media or punctual blows, but which should be recorded over time to make it possible to acquire aptitudes to exercise citizenship by means of learning knowledge and results (such as the experience of the Asian Forum of Solidary Economy).

- To reach an autonomous and collective space for reflection and action that respects the diversity of the participants (urban and rural, for example) and to associate the decision makers with the inhabitants and researchers, experts in the subject matter, etc.

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