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## A Position Statement on International Development The Case of Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup>

### *Meta-Problems and Meta-Processes*

The deterioration of living conditions in Africa, marked by recurring and worsening signs of socio-ecological breakdown, reflect one of many levels of the dynamic and evolving world problématique or meta-problem: the inability to identify and manage an increasingly complex pattern of socio-cultural and socio-ecological relationships.

In the face of mass starvation, millions of well-meaning northerners from Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have rushed to aid Africa as best they know how. The problems addressed are drought, food shortages, aid coordination, physical infrastructure development and so on. But these problems are not being solved; they are, in fact, perpetuated by the mismanagement of North/South relations and the relationship between modern and traditional sectors within African countries. In the absence of a fundamental reorientation of international development management, today's long-term development strategies will become tomorrow's long-term development crises.

There is no simple solution to socio-ecological breakdown in Africa. However, if the process of international development management is reoriented,

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then the pattern of relations between OECD countries and Africa, and between the modern and traditional sectors, can be changed. Addressing this meta-problem requires a meta-process, which in our work we have defined as a dual search-and-position process.

### *Search and Position: Roles and Distinctions*

A search process opens up new perspectives about the relationship between organizations and their environments. The search conference as an explicit method was pioneered by Eric Trist and Fred Emery in the United Kingdom, Australia and North America.

A "position" goes beyond the open-ended search process to take and test *positions* and *critical issues* as an essential step toward making decisions and taking concrete action about issues that are not presently being dealt with, even when they are recognized as critical concerns. The first position conference was conducted with the Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association in 1982/83 as a part of an action-research project concerning the futures of the industry (Chevalier and Taylor, 1983).

The search conference plays a significant role in defining and giving coherence to a new domain of interests and activity. It encompasses, as far as possible, all relevant interests; it is an idealized planning process in that it works from the perspective of defining an ideal future and ways and means of achieving that future. It does this by bringing together a diverse group of interests, often bringing such a domain of interests together for the first time.

The domain-formation process is essentially accomplished by the participants in the search. Professional facilitators play a passive role in which they guide the process with no direct substantive input. Their primary goal is to create an interaction among participants and to create conditions for a domain of issues and interests to emerge.

The principles of the search conference are democratic. All the interests should have the opportunity to participate in the definition of a new domain and should have a forum in which to speak. The goal is to achieve collaboration among the participants and thus to achieve a higher probability of long-term success. If there is consensus on the nature of the domain, there is a much stronger likelihood of being able to achieve some of the goals and objectives that emerge from the search process.

A position conference is held in conjunction with, or following, a search conference. It builds on the issues developed in the search. It is aimed at managing the relationships among the interests that have been identified in the search process. It does not attempt to address all the issues that emerge, but

rather addresses the critical issues. Beyond simply guiding the process, the facilitator has a professional role as a catalyst.

A major difference between search and position processes is that, in the former, the external role of facilitators is passive nonintervention; in the latter, the external role involves active intervention. It is important to stress that the external role in the position process is not to define the substance of the position. Rather, it is to *initiate* new patterns of relationship among the interests involved by presenting a position that cannot be fully defended and that, by definition, requires modification by the conference.

The perspective of a position conference is one of leadership; the focus is on defining and facilitating the emergence of leadership around a particular issue.

The “position statement” is a key aspect of the position conference. It is prepared by the facilitators as an external group. This permits the presentation of a position that goes beyond the current positions of organizations and individuals directly involved in the problématique. A position statement is not developed in isolation by the facilitators. The key ideas are discussed and debated with individuals in the domain prior to the meeting, so that the position has some reference to the realities of the situation.

A position conference may be held without a search in cases of a relatively clear domain with issues that have so far not been addressed. In cases of a domain with a commonly accepted set of critical issues, it may be counterproductive to operate in a search mode. The participants may be resistant if they feel they have a grasp of the critical issues and will want to get on with addressing them. In these cases, a position conference would be a more appropriate starting point.

An alternative approach to building a position—injecting ideas into a system—is the one we discuss here in which a position statement is circulated to the key interests in a community with no definite plans for a follow-up conference but for purposes of stimulating debate and comment and leading to action. This approach has its weaknesses because there is no clearly defined event in which to generate reactions and stimulate debate. It is, however, a networking process through which a constituency of interest can be built and potential leadership may begin to emerge.

Search- and position-conferencing are both domain based, not organization based. Their purpose is to form and redefine domains so that issues across organizational boundaries can be addressed. They both consider the increasing multiplicity of “nodes of power” (Emery and Emery, 1978) and are mechanisms for generating joint action and the joint design of new patterns and new solutions. A search conference identifies and encompasses the interests and a position conference is about managing the relationships between and among the interests.