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Referent Organizations and the Development of Inter-Organizational Domains[1]

Introduction

The term "organizational domain" means the opposite of what Evan (1966) means by the term "organization-set." This references an organization field to a focal organization, whereas the term domain references the focal organization to the organizational field, which now becomes the object of inquiry. In the title, "inter" is put before "organizational" to distinguish present usage from that of Thompson (1967), who employs the term "domain" to refer to the system of relations which any single organization needs to maintain with its transactional environment--a usage that is within the organization-set perspective. By contrast, inter-organizational domains are concerned with field-related organizational populations. An organizational population becomes field-related when it engages with a set of problems, or a societal problem area, which constitutes a domain of common concern for its members. The set of organizations is then "directively correlated" (Sommerhoff, 1950, 1969) with the problem area.

A complex problem area of this kind is often referred to as a problématique (Chevalier, 1966), or "mess" (Ackoff, 1974, Vol.III). The issues involved are too extensive and too many-sided to be coped with by any single organization, however large. The response capability required to clear up a mess is inter- and multi-organizational.

Since problématiques, meta-problems or messes--rather than

discrete problems--are what societies currently have to face up to, the cultivation of domain-based, inter-organizational competence has become a necessary societal project. The focus of this paper will be on advanced industrial societies of the Western type whose very development has brought this situation about. Yet these societies are weak in their inter-organizational capability, as compared with their capability at the level of the single organization, though here also the higher level of interdependence present in the contemporary environment is rendering traditional bureaucratic models dysfunctional. Debureaucratization of single organizations is necessary but not sufficient. Needed also are advances in institution-building at the level of inter-organizational domains. Inter-organizational domains are functional social systems that occupy a position in social space between the society as a whole and the single organization. In one perspective, a society may be said to construe itself in terms of domains which tend to actualize themselves in concrete settings. These comprise their "locales."

Let me give an example. A problématique which has relatively recently emerged as a domain is energy. Another is the declining Northeast of the United States. In an article in the *New York Times* Rohatyn (1979) describes an organizational proposal which links these two domains in a way which, in his contention, would begin to solve the meta-problem. Involved is the taking of a regional initiative through which is to be created an Energy Corporation of the Northeast. The states would participate by subscribing initial capital (a dollar per head), the federal government by guaranteeing loans. The corporation would not be an operating agency but would perform a regulative function and be concerned with development. Facilities would be operated by private parties who would be asked to invest more than 50% of the capital cost of any undertaking.

An organization of this type is called a "referent organization" (Trist, 1977b)--a term developed from the concept of reference groups. Such organizations, of which there are several varieties, are of critical

importance for domain development. Notice that the Energy Corporation of the
Northeast is to be regulative, not operational. Moreover, it is to be
controlled by the stakeholders involved in the domain, not from the outside.
Yet it will not be isolated. The federal government is asked to provide an
input, and not all the private parties would have to come from the region.
Nevertheless, activities are region-centered in the locale of the domain.

The importance of regulation by stakeholders can scarcely be over-
emphasized, for the danger is considerable that the organizational fashioning,
the institution building, the social architecture (to use Perlmutter's [1965]
term) required at the domain level in complex modern societies will either
take the wrong path or not be attempted at all. By the wrong path is meant
organizational elaboration in terms of bureaucratic principles that would
extend central power and hierarchical form throughout a domain. This would
lead to the corporate state, to a very high degree of totalitarianism
throughout the society. If, on the other hand, through fear of this, no
attempt is made to weave an appropriate fabric at the domain level, the result
can only be further social fragmentation. In the limit there would simply be
large numbers of self-isolating and competing entities, which would, through
minimizing their interdependence, prevent the attainment of the degree of
organic solidarity (in Durkheim's [1893] sense) necessary to hold a complex
society together.

These two directions are but two sides of the same penny. They
are binary opposites, one being simply the negation of the other. Neither can
provide the organizational means likely to lead towards a desirable human
future. A lasting societal advance will entail the identification of a set of
nonbureaucratic principles at the domain level which will constitute a
distinct logical type (in Whitehead and Russell's [1910-13] sense). These
principles may be called socio-ecological as contrasted with those
appertaining to either bureaucratic extensionism or self-sufficient,
dissociative reductionism. Socio-ecological principles imply the centrality
of interdependence. Entailed is some surrender of sovereignty along with

considerable diffusion of power. There is no overall boss in a socio-ecological system, though there is order which evolves from the mutual adjustment of the parts who are the stakeholders. Any overriding purpose which emerges from their sense of being in the same boat would depend on their arriving at a shared understanding of the issues. Any change of direction would be checked back with them.

Socio-ecological principles enable the organizational life of the society to be strengthened at the domain level in ways that are self-regulating rather than becoming imperial or remaining ineffectual. If self-regulation be democratic, then the establishment at the domain level of an order which conforms to democratic values is a major project of our times. A level of complexity has now been reached which renders authoritarianism and laissez-faire maladaptive and unviable as societal modes. Facing a future of increasing complexity means trying self-regulation within interdependence, learning how to cultivate a new logical type. We do not have much experience of self-regulation at the domain level. Much evolutionary experimentation (as Dunn [1971] calls it) will be required.

Environmental Types

In order to develop the argument further, reference will be made to some conceptual work which my Australian colleague, Fred Emery, and I began in the 1960s on what we called the Causal Texture of Organizational Environments (Emery and Trist, 1965, Vol.III), which we have been developing since that time in several publications jointly and independently (Emery, 1967, 1976, 1977; Emery and Emery, 1976; Emery and Trist, 1965, 1972; Trist, 1967, 1976, 1977a, 1977b, 1979, 1980) and of which the present paper is an extension.

To distinguish the contextual environment as supplying the boundary conditions for transactional relations was an important step in the original analysis for, as the environmental field becomes more "richly joined"

(in Ashby's [1956] sense), as the parts become more interconnected, there is greater mutual causality (Maruyama, 1963). The denser the organizational population in the social habitat (and the more this itself is limited by the increasing constraints emanating from the physical environment--whose resources are no longer perceived as boundless), the more frequently do the many causal strands become enmeshed with each other. This means that forces from the contextual field begin to penetrate the organization-set. This creates what we have called "turbulence" for the organization whose internal repertoire may only too easily lack the "requisite variety" for survival. Ashby's law of requisite variety states that when a system's response repertoire cannot match increases in variety emanating from the environment, that system's survival is endangered. This is our situation at the present time.

The contemporary world environment is characterized by much higher levels of interdependence and complexity than hitherto existed. These have led in turn to a much higher level of uncertainty. The consequent variety overload is experienced by the organization and the individual alike as a "loss of the stable state" (Schon, 1971).

Emery and I distinguished four environmental types, the first two of which (the placid random and placid clustered) describe conditions of relative stability and have become marginal in the contemporary environmental mix.

The disturbed-reactive environment (Type 3) is the world of big industrial organizations and equally of outsize government departments. It is a world in which everything gets centralized--the world which Galbraith (1967) has called the New Industrial State, but which is now becoming the Old Industrial State. For the very success of this world is bringing it to its own limit, thereby creating a very different environment which is gaining in salience.

The new environment (Type 4) is called the turbulent field. In such a field, large competing organizations, all acting independently, in many

diverse directions, produce unanticipated and dissonant consequences in the overall environment which they share. These dissonances mount as the field becomes more densely occupied. The result is a kind of contextual commotion. This makes it seem as if "the ground" were moving as well as the organizational figures. This is what is meant by turbulence.

It becomes imperative, therefore, that we find ways through which the regulation and reduction of turbulence can be achieved. The development of self-regulating, inter-organizational domains offers one such way. The turbulence emanating from the Type IV environment is reflected in a set of meta-problems which single organizations are unable to meet. Therefore, an additional response capability is required to produce a multi-stable system (in Ashby's [1960] sense) at the domain level. A strengthened set of directive correlations at the domain level is postulated as providing the initial conditions for a negotiated order to evolve. A negotiated order will need to be founded on collaboration rather than competition (Trist, 1977a), collaboration being the value base appropriate for the adaptive cultivation of interdependence. So far as this process gains ground, a mode of macro-regulation may be brought into existence which is turbulence-reducing without being repressive or fragmenting. Its virtue will be that it will have been built by the stakeholders themselves. This is the essence of the different logical type.

Aspects of Domain Formation

Table 1 sets out some of the key characteristics of domain formation. It is important to realize that domains are cognitive as well as organizational structures, else one can only too easily fall into the trap of thinking of them as objectively given, quasipermanent fixtures in the social fabric rather than as ways we have chosen to construe various facets of it. Domains are based on what Vickers (1965) called "acts of appreciation." Appreciation is a complex perceptual and conceptual process which melds

together judgments of reality and judgments of value. A new appreciation is made as a meta-problem is recognized. As the appreciation becomes more widely shared, a domain begins to be identified. It is most important that the identity of the domain is not mistaken through errors in the appreciative process, otherwise all subsequent social shaping becomes mismatched with what is required to deal with the meta-problem. As an identity is acquired the domain begins to take a direction which makes a path into the future as to what may be attempted in the way of courses of action. All this entails some overall social shaping as regards boundaries and size: what organizations are to be included, heterogeneity, homogeneity, etc. Along with this, an internal structure evolves as the various stakeholders learn to accommodate their partially conflicting interests while securing their common ground. Locales begin to be established.

Table 1   Aspects of Domain Foundation

Making a shared appreciation....   of the meta-problem

Acquiring an acceptable identity...   for the domain

Setting an agreed direction...   for development pattern

          into the future

Overall social shaping ...   as regards boundaries,

                                           sizes, etc.

Evolving an internal structure ...   from stakeholder

                                           accommodation

The process may be illustrated from the field of health in the United States which is in the process of being restructured into a new domain but where a hold-up has occurred. The meta-problem became widely recognized as the crisis in health-care costs grew more severe, but this simply served to show that there were many other aspects of the problématique. The field has

become unfrozen from earlier patterning but has not yet achieved a widely accepted new identity. The amount of conflict and the degree of ambiguity have been too great. This has prevented any clear direction being set regarding a future path so that critical organizational choices cannot yet be made about the overall patterning of health-care services. Meanwhile, schemes such as Health Maintenance Organizations and Health Systems Agencies are under trial by way of "evolutionary experimentation," while others, such as Medicare and Medicaid, enable the status quo, however costly, to muddle along. What has happened, or rather not happened, in the health field underlines the magnitude of the appreciative task--and its politics--when major changes in concepts and values amounting to a paradigm shift have to take place before a domain can be restructured, especially when the society as a whole is involved. Argyris and Schon's *Organizational Learning--An Action Perspective* (1978) is an analysis independent of mine yet drawing on many of the same ideas. It is an example of the current thinking being generated.

Can we improve the work of appreciation? Can we learn to speed it up? When the locale is a region or a community, the smaller scale and greater immediacy seem to enable more to be accomplished. Such locales may constitute our most accessible learning theaters for building domains.

Functions of Referent Organizations

There are two broad classes of domains which are complementary: those which display some kind of centering in terms of a referent organization (of which there are several variations) and those which remain uncentered and retain a purely network character. These latter comprise social movements concerned with the articulation of latent value alternatives. They arise spontaneously at the periphery of the society. In *Beyond the Stable State*, Schon (1971) describes the youth movement of the 1960s in these terms. Such movements--and there are several afoot at the present time--are important as providing a "critical sociology" of the present society and as conducting what

McLuhan and Barrington (1972) have called environmental probes into possible futures. But they are not in themselves purposeful. Once, however, a referent organization appears, purposeful action can be undertaken in the name of the domain. To be acceptable the referent organization must not usurp the functions of the constituent organizations, yet to be effective it must provide appropriate leadership.

Referent organizations have three broad functions, as shown in Table 2. The first is regulation as distinct from operation--operations are the business of the constituent organizations. Regulation entails setting the ground rules, determining the criteria for membership, maintaining the values from which goals and objectives are derived, undertaking conflict

Table 2   Functions of Referent Organizations

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Regulation....	of present relationships and activities; establishing ground rules and maintaining Base values
Appreciation...	of emergent trends and issues; developing a shared image of a desirable future
Infrastructure support...	resource, information sharing, Special projects, etc

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resolution and sanctioning activities. But a referent organization also has a time perspective which tends to be longer term than that of the constituent organizations. It is consequence- rather than result-oriented (to use Ozbekhan's [1971] distinction), so that it begins to assume considerable responsibility for the future of the domain. This entails the appreciation of emergent trends and issues and the working out with the constituent organizations of desirable futures and modifying practice accordingly. Mobilization of resources may be an especially important item, as is

developing a network of external relations. This is an interactive planning role (Ackoff, 1974, Vol.III) which is an extension of the regulative function.

The life of referent organizations is by its very nature discontinuous, entailing the bringing together in various contexts of representatives of the constituent organizations. A staff is therefore necessary to provide infrastructure support, but the staff must be prevented from taking over the appreciative work of the leadership which is generalist rather than specialist.

Types of Referent Organizations

There are several varieties of referent organizations which may combine more than one of the traits listed in Table 3. There is one class in which a constituent organization of the organizational population becomes the referent organization and another class in which a new organization is created for this purpose by the members of the domain. Members may be more certain of controlling the referent organization in the latter case, but successful referent organizations of the first class tend to include a wide cross section of interest groups, so that they have network-connectedness to most of the key constituencies of the domain. Those with which I have been concerned in recent field studies, whether constituent or representative, have also been voluntary and emergent. One might hypothesize that referent organizations concerned with newly recognized domains, which require an innovative response capability, would have these characteristics.

A representative referent organization, which is also emergent and voluntary, is the Jamestown Area Labor-Management Committee (Keidel and Trist, 1980). It is composed of the presidents or general managers and chief union officers of all the manufacturing plants in the area. The problématique of the domain was economic decline, the task to offset this decline by improving labor relations, raising the quality of work life and encouraging industrial development.

Table 3   Types of Referent Organizations

Constituent	Representative
Mandated	Voluntary
Established	Emergent
Single	Multiple

A far-reaching process of community collaboration has not only been initiated but sustained, so that a desirable future is gradually being created. The Committee (1977) has reported on its first five years and intends to report on its first 10.

A referent organization of the constituent type, also emergent and voluntary and concerned with offsetting economic decline, is a group known as "Sudbury 2001." Sudbury is a town in northeast Ontario, often called the nickel capital of the world. It is typical of the single industry resource towns of Canada, though larger than most. Sudbury 2001 (1979) began as a small planning group concerned with working out a diversified economy for Sudbury's future in face of the decline in nickel-mining. What has enabled this group, among the many statutory and voluntary bodies in Sudbury, to take on the character of a referent organization? Certainly it has been its capacity to make the appreciations relevant to the identification of a desirable future, but it has also been its capacity to attract to its Council leading members of the key local interest groups: the chairman of the regional municipality, the Mayor of the City of Sudbury, the provincial members of parliament, senior resident managers from International Nickel and Falconbridge, senior officials of the unions concerned, the president of the Regional Trades Council, the leading local publisher, presidents of the local university and community college, the director of regional planning, etc. Thus, 2001 has become as representative as the Jamestown Area Labor-Management Committee and as inclusive of the key stakeholders.

Jamestown and Sudbury are similar in belonging to the hinterland, the "Boondocks," the periphery. In a study of community initiatives in the management of decline in several peripheral communities in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Trist, 1977b), the referent organizations have been found to have this in common--they contain the local "establishment" which has taken on the unfamiliar role of being the leading edge of change. But in these communities the establishment is the fringe from the point of view of the larger society, and it is at the fringe that many of the most relevant appreciations are being made and some of the most effective referent organizations are appearing. In these locales the meta-problems are very directly and very concretely experienced by all sectors of the community, and the scale is more manageable than in large centers.

In national or world centers there has been a splitting between the establishment and fringe versions of key events which have attempted to grapple with salient meta-problems, as in the series of U.N. conferences from Stockholm onwards. But the fringe groups in these central contexts, unlike those in the peripheral communities described, lack the power to implement. They are nevertheless beginning to form a class of shadow referent organizations which are establishing a network on a worldwide scale. For example, the recently established International Foundation for Development Alternatives (1978) in Switzerland has been extending this network to increase the influence of nongovernmental groups, for example, on the official U.N. Conference on Development Strategy for the 1980s and on policy formation in Third World countries.

As regards mandated referent organizations, the Health Service Agencies may serve as an example. Though mandated, they are emergent. The intent is to decentralize regulation and planning in the health field to some 200 regional organizations which bring together the providers and consumers of health care--all the stakeholders of the domain-- on a local basis. How such trial organizations fare is a matter of extreme interest from the present standpoint. The pessimism which greeted their launching was almost enough to

foreclose them--a phenomenon expressive of the lack of confidence in domain-cohering endeavors in a society beset with the politics of special interest groups.

Established referent organizations have the mission of conservation, just as the emergent subset has the mission of innovation. They may be voluntary as well as mandated and constituent as well as representative. An example of the voluntary and constituent but established variety is the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews which establishes the rules of golf. The more august professional bodies would be examples of referent organizations which are established, voluntary, but representative. As to the category which is mandated, established and representative, examples would be various chartered bodies more common in England perhaps than in the United States; but as to the category mandated, established and constituent, what better illustration might there be than the Supreme Court of the United States. The law is what the Supreme Court says it is.

Given the rapid change rate in the contemporary environment, one has, in considering traditional referent organizations, to be on the look out for signs of obsolescence. If the appreciations on which they are based are no longer relevant, sizable and scarce resources may continue to be deployed to useless ends. To free our energies for the vast task of building institutions which will fashion emergent domains in ways which will be adaptive to conditions of turbulence, we must unprogram ourselves from the institutions which match the disturbed-reactive environment, for the paradigms stand in contradiction. The bureaucratic legacy and the competitive win/lose mentality bar the way to an adaptive confrontation with turbulence.

One final point in this brief survey of referent organizations: there are many domains in which more than one referent organization is present. The field may be polarized or in an unsettled state amid the claims of several candidates, who are not always aware of each other. This means that no shared appreciation has emerged. There is no clear identity. Action may be paralyzed or proceed in different directions. The health field shows a

picture of this kind. There are many others. This is a prevalent societal condition in the Type IV environment. It causes not only conflict but doubt. People are not sure what is real. Bewilderment results which leads to withdrawal and privatization when a redoubling of publicly shared appreciative efforts is needed so that consensus can be arrived at. It is this public process which allows the institution-building task to proceed as regards the fashioning of appropriate referent organizations, while continuous search opens up new alternatives against the moving ground of the Type IV environment.

Processes of Domain Development

On this background, brief mention will be made of certain processes found to be important in recent work on the development of emergent domains. The processes are shown in Table 4. The first process is networking, a term which has become much in vogue. Networks constitute the basic social form that permits an inter-organizational domain to develop as a system of organizational ecology. Networks are unbounded social systems that are nonhierarchical. They have properties that are complementary to those of the bounded wholes which comprise

Table 4   Process of Domain Development

Network initiatives

Search conferences

Design of a suitable referent organization

Convening the extended social field

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single organizations and which, in a systems sense, are hierarchical though not necessarily bureaucratic. In view of their nonhierarchical and open

character, networks provide channels of communication which are fluid and rapid. They travel through the social ground rather than between institutional figures. They cross levels and cover the range from private to public. They bring the most unexpected people into relevant contact so that nodes and temporary systems are formed which become levers of change.

Networks are initiated by proactive individuals who create new role space around themselves. They locate and resonate with other individuals whose appreciations are moving in the same direction as theirs. One of the last projects I arranged before leaving London was a study of the career patterns displayed by managers passing through the Administrative Staff College at Henley-on-Thames. This project was carried out by Rapoport (1970), who discovered three patterns. The first two were expected: the incremental and the metamorphic careers. The third--the tangential, i.e., the boundary spanner--was a surprise, especially as it was found to be on the increase. These were the networkers. This pattern has since been called the reticulist pattern by Friend et al. (1974).

A Dutch psychiatrist, Ravenswaaij (1972), has called such individuals "novelty detectors" after a cell of this type in the brain. In such individuals new appreciations of emerging meta-problems originate and build up as they interact with other network members, who tend to form a selectively interdependent set. They learn the art of walking through walls. Without carriers of this kind it is difficult to see how the process of appreciative restructuring can either take place fast enough or go far enough to permit emergent domains to be organized in time and on a scale that will allow the oncoming meta-problems to be contended with.

Another process that enables shared appreciation to evolve and emergent domains to develop more coherently is the search conference, which has been developed by Merrelyn and Fred Emery (1978; Emery, M., Vol.III) in Australia, and which has now been tried out in several different settings in Europe and North America. Searching is the equivalent of appreciating and is carried out in groups composed of the relevant stakeholders. The group meets

under social island conditions for two to three, sometimes for as long as five days. The opening sessions are concerned with elucidating the factors operating in the wider contextual environment--those producing the meta-problems and likely to affect the future. The content is contributed entirely by the members. The staff are facilitators only. Items are listed in the first instance without criticism in plenary session and displayed on flip charts which surround the room. The material is discussed in greater depth in small groups and the composite picture checked out in plenary. The group next examines its own organizational setting or settings against this wider background and then proceeds to construct a picture of a desirable future. Constraints and opportunities regarding this are then examined. It is surprising how much agreement there often is. Only when all this has been done is consideration given to action steps--and search conferences are not always ready to proceed with these. Their function is to be concerned with what Ozbekhan (1971) has called the normative phase of planning. If people can agree on ends in a future time perspective, if a common value base can be established through a process of shared appreciation--by undertaking what Michael (1973) has called "future oriented social learning"--they are likely to come to terms with more of their differences regarding means than they otherwise would. So far as this is done, they can begin to move towards a negotiated order and accept a system of macro-regulation which they will have created for themselves. Everything in this approach is based on participation, which is at the root of socio-ecological regulation.

The referent organizations so far mentioned have arisen spontaneously. The needs of domain development in the face of contemporary meta-problems have become so great that their design needs to be undertaken at a more conscious level than has hitherto been the case. This will make them more purposeful, more able to learn from their failures and successes and more able to seize opportunities.

Let me give an example of conscious design suggested by Emery (1976, Vol.III). It deals with a particularly important and frequent class of

cases--that in which the organizational population is too large to be directly represented on the referent organization. It has then to be represented by a sample. Emery has suggested that this sampling be random. If each constituent organization were to nominate an individual able and willing to serve, the sample could be drawn by a procedure modeled on that of jury service. There would be a period of office, say two years, so that careers could not be made in these roles. Special appointments would not be made, neither would there be voting. The panel members would not be representing their particular organizations but would be accountable as individuals to the domain. Emery has suggested such a procedure for selecting the members of the industrial councils recommended by the Jackson Committee (1975) in its report on policies for the Australian manufacturing industry. The aim is to prevent the domination of such councils by the more powerful inhabitants of the domain and to minimize manipulation by special interest groups. For these councils Emery thought that 30-40 members would provide an adequate sample and that any one set, by and large, would be as good as any other.

The work of such councils would be appreciation not operation. It would involve making critical value judgments concerning the way in which the domain might best develop. Though requiring multiple perspectives, such work is generalist, not specialist, in orientation. Though technical staff would be provided, the panels themselves would not be allowed to become technocratic. The proposed design reverses the bureaucratic model.

A point of special importance is the need of the referent organizations to remain in sensitive contact with the extended social field of the domain. For the referent organization cannot make too much of the going itself. The domain community must become part of the learning/appreciation process and must at critical junctures be convened. For example, in 1978 in Sudbury, 2001 had arranged a weekend conference of the "think-tank" type, expecting 30-40 people to engage in search type process. But by the due date major layoffs had taken place at International Nickel which made real at a new level the question of an alternative future for the community. Eleven hundred

people bought tickets and participated. 2001 was able to cope with this, and the event became a happening which led to a step-function change in the level of social learning and community consciousness. Emery calls this sort of happening a "flocking." Being half a Highland Scot, I prefer to call it a gathering. A practical outcome was a gift of $600,000 from the Provincial Premier, who showed up in person, to be used for feasibility studies and venture capital for new enterprises that might be started. By contrast, a community development organization (to which I have been research adviser), the Craigmillar Festival Society in Edinburgh, which has a long history of significant innovation in the domain of multiple deprivation, failed to extend it local support base just at the moment it was encountering unexpected opposition from the British government--though in a crisis two years previously with the regional government, it rapidly and successfully convened the domain community to prevent withdrawal of regional funds which would have led to the withdrawal of national and European Economic Community funds.

Network initiatives, fostering appreciative learning, designing appropriate referent organizations and convening the extended social field--so that consciousness is raised--are the types of process which, especially in sequence, can contribute to the development of inter-organizational domains if these are to develop along socio-ecological lines, fulfill their functions in contending with meta-problems and succeed in reducing contextual turbulence.

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