

Citizens' Assemblies challenges, methods and scales

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** Introduction of Pierre Calame - Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation for the Progress of the Humankind during the first meeting of Citizens assemblies coordinators in Paris - June 2008.*

"Finding at this table both old friends, with whom we have traveled a long way, and new faces, who open up the way to new adventures, is both a pleasure and a delight.

The idea for a Citizens' Assembly is the result of a long history, of a long way, which I would like to reconstruct briefly for you.

1. The idea of a Citizens' Assembly came up at Lille's World Citizens' Assembly

As a result of the World Citizens' Assembly celebrated in Lille in December 2001, in which many of you took part, the guidelines that since then deeply inspire our foundation's actions were set.

The first guideline is the so-called Agenda for the 21st century; that is, everything that we have to do together, urgently, in order to have a sustainable world, a world in which we could live. In that Assembly we discovered that this agenda is perfectly clear and that it is set on three basic principles: ethics (which values do we have to agree on so as to run our only planet together?); the evolution towards a sustainable society (even when our current development models are not); and, finally, a new art in running societies, a new governance, at a new stage of humanity in which problems are much more interconnected than they used to and in which local problems cannot be separated from global ones (everything in our daily lives tightly binds what happens on a local level to what happens on a global level). Thus we reached the conclusion that, as a Foundation, it was our duty to contribute as well as we could to the establishment of this agenda.

The second great achievement of the World Citizens' Assembly was the adoption of the Letter of human responsibilities, that is, the affirmation that we can agree on a common ethic. This common ethics is a reflection of our interdependences, and it is based on the recognition that everything we do has an impact on our neighbors, near or far, and that we are ethically capable of taking responsibility for that impact.

The third guideline was to be able to say, one day there will have to be not just one World Citizens' Assembly but local assemblies as well, national assemblies, regional Citizens' Assemblies.

2. Where do the idea and the methodological principles come from ?

How did the idea come to be a priority for us? In order to understand this, we have to go back in time to the birth of the Alliance for a responsible and united World and to the thoughts that encouraged Vezelay's group, which gave rise to this Alliance at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s.

Even then, we understood that we had to face radical changes for humanity. We also knew that these changes were at a world level, but that presented certain challenges.

First of all, even though there are global interdependences, there is no political community on such a scale. Thus, a new question arises. How is a community - especially a world community - constructed when there is no political community?

How can we arrive at the idea of coexistence, at the ability to handle that coexistence, coming from our differences? States and cities, communities already instituted with members, inhabitants and citizens, are generally managed, but how does one institute a community? How can that be generated? That was the first and greatest challenge.

The second greatest challenge was the fact that interdependence does not erase diversity. It is impossible to coexist on any level unless there is a simultaneous recognition of the richness there is in diversity, unless diversity is respected. Our challenge was to build unity from diversity, then.

Once this was set forward, other questions arose. What kind of diversity are we talking about? Can diversity be reduced to the dimension of social belonging or country belonging or territory belonging? The answer was definitely not. Particularly because we understood that we could not build a society that could be lived in, unless we connected some issues: there is no way we can act without changing the world. We were acutely aware that all things were intertwined.

Thus, we managed to define diversity on three dimensions: firstly, the geographical dimension; secondly, the social and professional dimension; and thirdly, the diversity of the issue to be dealt with, the thematic diversity. The whole construction of the Alliance, during the nineties, was organized around the idea that these three dimensions had to be dealt with simultaneously, that we had to build a conversation amongst ourselves within each of these diversity orders. This is how the idea for geo-cultural groups (geographical diversity), collegiate groups (socio-professional diversity), groups with theme projects, was born. These had to be progressively built, by confronting the conclusions reached from these

three processes, these three common perspectives. The very idea of a Citizens' Assembly had, from the very beginning, a significant methodological dimension.

3. The challenge of the instituting processes

The need to institute a community at a global level is clearly understood, but why should we confine ourselves to a global level? Why can't we also be interested in an assembly like the Malinese Citizens' Assembly, considering that there are already instituted communities and, as a result, the instituting challenge has vanished?

Our way of thinking has convinced us that even in the apparently instituted communities, which have institutions, parliaments, governments and administrations, the existence of these tools for running the society does not guarantee a permanent sense of belonging to this community.

I also went so far as to claim, in my own thoughts about governance, that it is imperative that a society re-institutes itself, that a society re-invents its common project. We think that this road through geographical, socio-professional and thematic diversities was in fact an interesting chance to build new perspectives for society.

4. Citizens' Assemblies as a response to the crisis of democracy

A third thought connected with the crisis of democracy was added to all this. The classic representative democracies are in crisis, at their own country's scale. This is clear in Africa and it is the Alliance's aim to re-establish governance there. This is also true at such a larger scale as the European Union, where the institutions, the rules –for example, the rules of free competition– have preceded the construction of a feeling of citizenship.

This is the reason why we thought it was pressing for democracy to re-shape, in order to move from a formal democracy, characterized by institutions and elections, to a substantial democracy, where all citizens take responsibility together for the challenges of society, and feel the right and the duty to understand and express themselves about a topic.

5. Citizens' Assemblies : a new space for dialogue between societies

The China – India Forum, the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly, the Citizens' Assembly of the Southern Cone, Maghreb's Assembly, all come from the idea that sectioning human communities along national or regional borders no longer reflects the nature of the world's interdependences. In spite of the frontiers, relationships between societies are still managed by foreign ministries – diplomatic relations- or by businesses– commercial relations.

This is not enough. Citizens no longer gain anything from it. As the events in Tibet and the circulation of the Olympic flame proved at the beginning of the year, relations between China and Europe are apparently very good on a diplomatic and commercial level, but they deep down show differences in understanding, which turn into sources of conflicts when events of apparent secondary importance take place.

If we want to build sustainable peace in the world, there is no other solution but to let citizens speak from the heart and upfront about the domestic problems which are now key to us: the world's problems.

As you can see, the idea for a Citizens' Assembly was born from the convergence of different but complementary problems: revitalizing democracy, directing the relations between unity and diversity, helping communities to institute themselves, and getting over traditional forms of relating between societies".