RESEARCH NOTE

Growing a community of conversation and understanding: The 2023 agenda for the systems community

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Abstract

In his 1970 report to the Club of Rome, Hasan Özbekhan compiled an extensive collection of intersecting issues confronting humanity—the Global Problématique. Alas, half a century later, we find ourselves even further entrenched in this network of complex, systemic issues that some have framed the Anthropocene, a period new to human history. Collectively, we must take seriously the question:

> what purposeful action will aid human flourishing, create and sustain a viable space for humanity, in our ongoing co-evolution with the Anthropocene-Biosphere?

Through ongoing reflections to this prompt, the theme of the IFSR's 2023 agenda is *community*. At the heart of this community, we place emphasis on the role of *conversation* to enable the co-creation of a common (yet not necessarily shared) *understanding*. Collective efforts to grow and participate in this diverse cyber-systemic community of conversation and understanding will enhance the capacity to shift from stasis towards transformative actions demanded by the Global Problématique. In the Batesonian sense, the prospect of making a meta-difference that makes a difference is the emergent promise of our enterprise made collective.

KEYWORDS

agenda 2023, community of inquiry, Global Problématique, innovating institutions, metamorphic flow-field, process of inquiry

1 | GROWING A COMMUNITY OF CONVERSATION AND UNDERSTANDING

The IFSR-facilitated conversations of its organisational members transitioned during 2021–2022 from an agenda for the systems community framed as 'rethinking agency' (see Klein et al., 2021) to one of 'growing a community of conversation and understanding'. The foundations of our efforts are the acts of *being in conversation*, pioneered within the IFSR through the influence of Bela Banathy, who from 1988 to 98 served the IFSR in a number of executive committee roles, including as a president (Dyer et al., 2015). Conversation is a means to enable those engaged in inquiry (Churchman, 1971) to 'turn together', a choreography that facilitates the emergence of new

— Top 10%'s share of national income (%)

Source: World Inequality Database

FIGURE 1 Income inequality: the top 10%'s share of national income (source: Schneiders, 2022).

understandings, practices, social relations, and hopefully, concerted action (Christakis, 2004; Steyaert & Jiggins, 2007). The crystallising focus of building capability in and through conversations is the so-called, Global Problématique.

2 | THE GLOBAL PROBLÉMATIQUE—A PROCESS OF INQUIRY

We humans live in a period new to human history, the Anthropocene world. From late 2019, humanity has been subjected to the perturbations of pandemic, economic disruption, including massive global inequality (Figure 1; Dixson-Declève et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2022), civil unrest including war and changes in whole-Earth dynamics associated with a human-induced Anthropocene (Ison, 2016, 2022). These perturbations are like wave-fronts breaking on the shore of our institutionalised ways of thinking and acting, buffered only by our as yet unrealised capacity to invent new institutions (norms and rules) and governance systems. Collectively, we must take seriously the question:

> what purposeful action will aid human flourishing, create and sustain a viable space for humanity, in our ongoing co-evolution with the Anthropocene-Biosphere?

For the IFSR the Global Problématique is a framing choice based on a particular lineage of systems and cybernetic (hereafter cybersystemic) research and scholarship (Box 1). It is also a framing choice that seeks to comit our community to on-going systemic co-inquiry in circumstances of uncertainty and complexity. Why? Because we seek to draw into future policy, research and scholarship

Box 1   The Global Problématique

Hasan Özbekhan (1970) introduced the 'global problematique' in a report to the Club of Rome, '*The Predicament of Mankind*', to refer to a 'bundle of problems' confronting humanity at that time (see Khayame et al., 2022). The Özbekhan Report said that these problems could not be solved:

- within electoral cycles because of their long-term characteristics;
- within individual countries because of their global scale;
- separately, because they constitute an interacting 'clusters of problems'

Drawing on the French 'problematique' Özbekhan et al. sought to frame 'an inextricable net of 49 long-term and global scale problems', problems which have grown larger, more complex, expanding at a rate greater than our human capacity, thus far, to formulate effective responses. Özbekhan's coining of 'problematique' preceded Rittel and Webber's (1973) classic distinction based on naming wicked and tame problems, but arose from experiences within a common cybersystemic intellectual milieu (Khayame et al., 2022).

Özbekhan also proposed the problématique as an antidote to '... the all-pervasive analytic or positivistic methodologies which, by shaping our minds as well as our sensibilities, have enabled us to do what we [humans] have done' (1970, pp. 4–5).

cybersystemic understandings, practices and innovations that can contribute to priority setting, funding proposals, institutional designs, and evaluative practices that mirror the systemic nature of Anthropocene dynamics. As a starting point, the co-inquiry acknowledges the history, and continuing relevance, of the Özbekhan (1970) agenda, one that raised issues that this community has still failed to effectively address and resolve, for example,

- making transparent how particular theories of change are held and pursued by different actors;
- the impact on our conversations, research publication, including refereeing, of different epistemological

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preferences and commitments held my individuals and groups, that is, the political ecology of our field;

- the too frequent failures in face-to-face assemblies or in online meetings to adopt the basic premises and protocols of responsible conversation (Zimmer, 2001a, 2001b).

For the IFSR, the Global Problématique requires understandings and practices that transcend modelling alone (Judge, 2018); as a framing it serves as a token to remind us that

- well-being and flourishing on our planet cannot be reduced to the sum of component parts; always the legendary whole is different to the sum of its parts;
- path dependencies in complex developments are shaped by complexity and emergence and the power of unfolding context through purposeful action;
- within the bigger picture, the larger whole of interconnectedness and interdependence, we humans still carry agency to act, to change;
- the viability of human flourishing is a product of the unfolding quality of our situated and collective relationship with the biosphere, a co-evolutionary dynamic, not a simple causal relationship with 'an environment' treated as an externality;
- in misplaced cravings for efficiency as a measure of performance, recognition of the importance of effectiveness, efficacy and ethicality have been lost as well as appreciation that in-built redundancy conveys resilience (Checkland, 1981; Preiser & Cilliers, 2010).

Today, the Global Problématique is an invitation to participate in a transdisciplinary process of co-inquiry. It is not about knowing all the details. It is about understanding the interconnectedness and interdependence of an emerging whole. In the flow of being and becoming, it is an autotelic process, an activity which is undertaken, not in the expectation of some future payoff, but because the activity itself is its own reward. It is the constant exploration of what is and what could be. It seeks common understandings that grow from co-reflected lived experience, a growing community of autotelics, scholars of their own purposeful cybersystemic actions and commitments.

3 | THE IFSR—A CYBER-SYSTEMIC COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Offering and enacting leadership within a cyber-systemic organisation is itself a challenging role, as many in our

conversations this past year reveal. Acknowledging global problems can be immobilising for some; negotiating differences in understanding, including different, often unacknowledged, epistemological commitments, can produce tensions that sometimes alienate or undermine; there are challenges in creating and sustaining organisation that enables appreciation of diversity and the continuous influx of ideas that this entails. Rewards come from bringing ideas to a new generation who can find value in them; moments of insight/reframing; enabling connections—macrolevel thinking to microlevel actions; creating environments for people who have ideas/energy to make an impact; realising opportunity to co-create with others—'there's such excitement when people start talking—it grows into something bigger'; helping bridge gaps between theory and practice; being a full person, learning.

Constructive critique is welcome; it is not the same as criticism but requires certain 'languaging skills'. Well-considered critique can be motivating, for responses to the 'global problematique', for example—learning how other cultures articulate the pursuit of human flourishing. For this reason, the contributions to this special edition 'Systems East & West 2.0' are to be welcomed (Nguyen et al., 2020); as Wu (2022) says,

> I would say that no one can step outside one's history and therefore tradition-switching is not an option. Instead, what we need is what Richard Rorty (1999) called 'ethnocentric inquiry'—start from one's tradition and recognise that others start from theirs, try to understand and appreciate differences, identify and enlarge overlaps, search for collective action and learn from the consequences of acting upon it.

It is unprofitable to fall into practices that define and redefine what a concept is, or is not (Dehdarian et al., 2022). Too often these are disguised exhortations 'to do it my way because I am right'. Much better to take responsibility for one's own practice (or that of a sector, or professional domain) and thus to use a concept, explaining how, why and with what effect this use matters, or makes a difference. Thus, conversations can transition from debates to dialogue. To flourish as a community requires cybersystemic organisations to articulate and clarify their framing and narrative choices—if these are settled—if not then what issues are at stake? Also their products and services.

If we allow ourselves to go from *knowing about* or *knowing for*, to *knowing-in* or *knowing-through* action (doing) then common understandings, a basis for social learning will emerge.

Safe and nourishing spaces are needed as a home for processes of inquiry, learning and understanding—a maturity evolving process (Buckle, 2018). The IFSR-facilitated conversations among its organisational members is becoming such a space with particular Janus-like features (Koestler, 1978): looking out to our membership and inwards to effective executive committee (EC)-functioning and strategising in a context of limited person-hours amongst those who volunteer their time.

4 | TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION—INNOVATING INSTITUTIONS

Organisation is realised through a network of key relationships—change the relationships and breakdown occurs (death of an organism; failure of an organisation). Maintenance of organisation is needed for longevity, or innovation is needed which rearticulates a purpose and realises (in the social world) a new organisation. Human-invented institutions (norms and human-invented rules) mediate the relational dynamics of organisations (fee structures, constitutions, management structures... the list is potentially endless). Thus, in science and scholarship those who offer new explanations encounter the old, held in place by historically derived institutions. This is a challenge in addressing the human-generated Anthropocene (Jasanoff, 2021). Seeking transformation is not so much a question of exhorting a need for 'system change' or applying the linear model of knowledge transfer or technology adoption. What is needed is co-creating, holding and appreciating, a compelling theory of change that clears the decks of historical patterns of organisation, scaffolded by institutions no longer fit for purpose. It is a question of growing, through concerted-action, common understandings of what an organisation is and could be. And it is a question of what informs and forms the balance between the organisation's present and future. From a systems perspective, it is the organisation's purpose that facilitates the relationship between the here-and-now and the then-and-there.

Transformative action, however, does not stop there (Bradbury et al., 2019). As much as the organisation seeks to grow a common understanding of itself, it needs to grow understanding of its environment, enhancing the relationships with whatever the organisation identifies as its environment, other organisations, people, groups, communities, and societies. As Churchman (1979) said: 'The environment of a problem is far more difficult and far more important to perceive than the physical environment of a city or a nation.' What emerges in this larger context of growing a common understanding can be likened to a metamorphic flow-field. From the complex interplay in the connectivity and interdependence of the larger whole metamorphic transformation grows from itself into itself. What facilitates this transformation is social learning based on common understandings, shared practices and changed social relations.

5 | GROWING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING—FOSTERING DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Co-creating common understandings holds, in a Batesonian sense, the prospect of making a meta-difference that makes a difference. For Churchman (ibid) '... the systems approach belongs to a whole class of approaches to managing and planning our human affairs with the intent that we as a living species conduct ourselves properly in this world.' Thus, whatever collaborative praxis we can generate seeks an understanding of the understanding that informs and forms our relationships to ourselves, to the living world and society at large.

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