

### Reflections on Conferences

Dudley Seers, Director of the Institute of Development Studies, has sent us the following comments on the manifest and latent functions of conferences, based on two recent experiences of them:

I attended two conferences in Africa over Easter, one at Ibadan, organized jointly by N.I.S.E.R. and the Ministry of Economic Development, on National Reconstruction and the Development of Nigeria; the other at Dar-es-Salaam, organized by the University of East Africa, on The Teaching of Economics in Africa. Comparing them in retrospect raises a number of general questions about the structure and content of conferences.

There are, so far as I am aware, no conventions about conference criticism: this is in fact a curiously neglected subject. Of course, reports are written after conferences, conveying their results. And when these reports are published as books, reviews appear in professional journals. But neither the reports nor the reviews normally discuss how adequately the organization of the conference contributed to its objectives. (Indeed, the reviewer is rarely in a position to assess this.) Yet conference organization seems well worth investigating critically, as a subject in its own right, if only so that we can learn from experience with different techniques - though someone who organizes conferences himself has to be rather cautious; the standards he sets up may well be turned against himself! It is not easy to organize a conference so that it is attended by those with most to contribute, and still harder to set up the discussions in such a way that the full potential contribution of the participants (which is often massive) is extracted.

Two distinct questions of organization are involved. One is ground organization - travel arrangements, circulation of papers, translation and secretarial support, welfare of delegates (accommodation, meals, hospitality, mail, laundry, etc., etc.). These are technically interesting, but trivial, except in as far as they affect the morale and contributions of delegates. This effect may not, however, be as significant as many people think. The Nigerian conference had a ground organization incomparably better than the one at Dar, but nevertheless there can be little doubt that the latter was more successful, in part because organization was better in the much more crucial matter of conference business.

'Success' depends of course on what is being attempted. This is not easy to ascertain: one has to distinguish between overt objectives, other objectives, and unintended by-products. The overt objectives of the Nigerian conference were: "To review the achievements of Nigeria's first National Development Plan and to suggest guidelines for the preparation of the second". Judged by these aims, the conference achieved little. There was no proper evaluation of the first plan (other than in a background paper). Moreover, only rather miscellaneous ideas were produced for the second, some of which were mutually incompatible.

The basic reason was this: when the conference had been conceived, it had been expected that the civil war would have ended by the time it took place. As it was, nobody at the conference could be sure how long the war would last, what would be the country's economic condition at its end, nor - most important of all - what the settlement would be. Indeed, few of those taking part even broached such issues.

Secondly, no clear national development goals were laid down. The conference in fact spent a good deal of time discussing, rather inconclusively, what weight should be attached to different goals - fast growth; changing the income distribution between town and country, between wage-earners and companies, between foreign and domestic companies, between North and South, etc; strengthening 'national identity' and social cohesion; and so on. Nor were assumptions about (e.g.) exports and population growth specified.

Thirdly, the discussions were insufficiently focussed. Huge subjects like 'agricultural development' were allotted plenary sessions of a couple of hours each; the papers prepared for them were distributed only hours before they took place; two-thirds of the time of each session was taken up by the chairman, the author of the paper and two or three platform discussants, leaving less than an hour for contributions by the other 100 or so participants.

These defects were all the more frustrating precisely because the selection of participants had been good, and the arrangements of seating (based on a square) would have been just right for a productive debate. Indeed, despite everything the Nigerian planners present must have picked up many ideas at the conference which will sooner or later prove useful, for example, on the implications

of becoming a petroleum economy. Any one of these - when translated into policy - might justify the resources put into the meeting.

Yet one must not fall into the trap of judging a conference merely by its overt objectives. Every conference is also intended to build goodwill for its sponsors in some quarters - with other universities, government departments, international professional circles, allies, aid agencies, et cetera. This objective may well conflict with those which are overt. The selection of chairmen and platform speakers is never an entirely objective choice among those who are technically the most qualified - it is always at least partially determined by the need to win friends (or propitiate enemies). Sooner or later, any conference organizer has to face the question: in which niche will old X do least damage?

When one takes account of such constraints, the many conferences look very different, the Ibadan conference especially so. Undoubtedly, it did build goodwill in various quarters, and given the constraints, the discussion was of an impressively high level.

Finally, there are always imponderable benefits from bringing together people working in the same field, to exchange ideas, to compare research projects and to get more personal knowledge of each other. The contacts forged in this way may last for years. Not least of the functions of any international professional conference is that of improving the labour market, by disseminating information on the capacities, qualifications and availability of employees, and on the needs, personalities and resources of employers.<sup>1)</sup> (Of course this often works against the interests of the universities of the Third World, and is therefore on balance a doubtful benefit from their point of view.) It is, however, hard to assess such results. Every conference yields them in some degree, provided participants are heterogeneous in terms of nationality, seniority, etc., but fairly homogeneous in disciplines and fields of interest.

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<sup>1)</sup> This is perhaps the main function of some conferences; some would say that the annual conference of the American Economic Association is a case in point.

The main reason why the Dar conference appeared to go a long way towards achieving its overt objective - improving the economics syllabuses used in the Universities of Africa - was precisely because the other objectives were less important. But in addition, the organization of business was on the whole good (despite rather poor acoustics and the use of lecture rooms - which rather naturally encourages lecturing). There was a reasonable balance in the participants, the majority actually teaching economics in Africa, with a few non-economists, students and outsiders to ask awkward questions - perhaps too few non-economists. And the programme was not bad. It was an excellent idea to invite a panel of 'consumers' - i.e. employers of economists - to explain what sort of product they wanted; and it was also obviously right to split the conference into groups which discussed in detail the guidelines for various subjects (manpower studies, international economics, finance, etc.). The main plenary on the first day was a doubtful success, since it rushed breathlessly through a large number of contributed papers, but this may have been unavoidable in terms of goodwill - academics have to be allowed to make written and oral statements before they will settle down to a serious discussion. More questionable were the allocation of one plenary to consideration of all the group reports and that of the summing-up to a panel (especially since it was fed questions at random). Perhaps the conference should have lasted four days instead of three.

Yet to say this conference appeared successful in terms of its overt objective is to betray the critic's own prejudices. In my view, it marked a decisive step forward in fashioning syllabuses appropriate for Africa, instead of copying those overseas. There was a healthy emphasis on assessing the assumptions of imported theories, such as the marginal productivity theory of wages, in the light of local conditions and institutions, even if little progress could be made in constructing new and more relevant theories. The report should help expatriate teachers, still very numerous in tropical Africa, to adjust their teaching to local circumstances, something which most hardly begin to do until they are about to return home. But those who believe - and there are still some - that the main object of undergraduate training is to produce somebody capable of entering a foreign graduate school will no doubt have considered the conference a serious setback.