

“Retos de los Derechos Sexuales y la Salud Sexual y Reproductiva en México: Estrategias y Liderazgos Jóvenes:” A Mexican Future Search*

Anne Gardon

In November 2002, I co-facilitated a future search in Mexico on the topic of sexual rights and sexual and reproductive health. The participants in this event included 64 women and men from government, nongovernmental organizations, the health and education sectors, foundations, media; and, among them, 30 diverse youth leaders from throughout Mexico. This group met in Cuernavaca for three days to build new networks and identify a shared vision and collaborative initiatives.

Judging from the storm of e-mails exchanged after the three-day conference, it was a challenging and inspiring experience for many of the participants, as it was for me. Reflecting on the event, one of them put it this way: “We created new networks between people who work in the field. I believe that the methodology allowed us to identify common ground and to create consensus as we looked toward the future Really I felt that we have shared very special moments that touched us all personally.”**

*“Challenges of Sexual Rights and Reproductive Health in Mexico: Strategies and Youth Leadership”

**María Consuelo Mejía of Católicos Por El Derecho a Decidir and member of the Future Search Planning Committee

In the months since the conference, several groups have continued to meet. The planning group has been working on pulling together the documentation and mechanisms to keep participants connected.

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Overall, participants’ responses and follow-up suggest tremendous potential for the application of future search in Mexico. Indeed, many of the participants and other colleagues of mine in Mexico have expressed an interest in learning more about the method so that they can use it themselves.

As is often the case, there are many stories about this future search to be told. On one level, there is a story about international funding of initiatives, like this one, that join first-world financial resources with a complex social issue for which there is limited funding within Mexico. There is also a story about cross-cultural collaborations between funder and organizer, and between facilitators and the lessons learned. And, of course,

there is the story of the actual future search embedded in its unique Mexican context.

At the risk of simplification, I’d like to suggest three themes that intersected these stories as I viewed them in my role as consultant-facilitator. They were: the challenge of building ownership in a funder-

initiated project, reinforcing transparent processes especially related to decision making, and recognizing the power of direct democracy or creating space for everyone’s voice to be heard.

In planning and implementing this future search conference, “Retos de los Derechos Sexuales y la Salud Sexual y Reproductiva en México,” I experienced once again the alignment of future search philosophy and practices with these three tasks.

Building Ownership of the Future Search

In this project, I had the opportunity to work closely with many Mexican colleagues, including co-facilitators Raquel Eva Ponce, María Teresa San Román of the Institute for International Education/Latin American Office (the Mexican sponsor), and a 10-person planning group. Our collective task in planning and convening a three-day future search conference was shaped in part by four factors leading up to our work together:

1. The Lucille and David Packard Foundation of Palo Alto, California, had proposed to fund a future search conference in Mexico, as they had done in several other countries (e.g., Nigeria, Philippines, and Ethiopia), to help strengthen networks within the reproductive health field.
2. The organizer in Mexico, the Latin American Office of the Institute for International Education (IIE), was linked to the reproductive health field principally through an inter-

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national scholarships program they manage.

3. The planning group was thus an extension of the networks of the Packard Foundation and IIE, and included a number of NGOs that are recipients of Packard funding and rely on funding from this and other foreign foundations.
4. Eva and I were hired after the planning group dismissed the original facilitation team. Given issues of power and control that appeared to have found expression in the initial consulting relationship, members of the planning group were wary about how to proceed after having already invested three months in planning and postponed the conference date.

Given these circumstances, it was critically important that the sponsoring organizations created the space for the planning group to openly deliberate and decide among themselves how to proceed at each step of the way when difficulties arose with the first consulting group. Though this was time-consuming, these deliberations resulted in the planning group collectively recommitting itself to using the future search methodology and to hiring the second facilitation team.

One of the most simple and effective things that Eva and I did as the “new” consultants to the planning group was to present a clear, comprehensive overview of the principles and practice of future search, and to model in our behavior the group’s ownership of all key decisions. What we discovered was that specific issues that had been contentious were not so once the group

understood the principles involved and began to feel that “it is our project.” I remained concerned, however, that the dynamics regarding ownership of this project had been only partially negotiated. Though the planning group had demonstrated a high degree of commitment to the project and had made a significant leap of faith in pressing ahead when they encountered difficulties—all of which was admirable

—there was still, in my view, a high degree of dependence on the funder and the sponsor.

It was my perception that we needed to continue to address transferring responsibility for key leadership tasks and for conference outcomes from the funder and sponsor to the planning group, and ultimately to the conference community. The potential risk of not negotiating this transfer was that participants would perceive conference outcomes as dependent upon external funding and

support rather than as a factor of their own vision and capacity. (Which did not happen.)

A couple of months later, when the planning group fully understood that it could not count on substantive post-event support from the funder or sponsor, the members significantly stepped up their own level of ownership by marshalling resources for conference documentation and follow-up. This responsibility for follow-up was, in turn, implicitly communicated to conference participants, with the result that there has been active follow-up on initiatives identified in the conference.

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Reinforcing Transparent Processes

It is standard practice to begin a future search conference with an overview of the principles of future search (i.e., whole system in the room, global exploration before local action, etc.) and an explanation of exactly what people can expect to happen over the next three days. In this brief introduction, Eva and I passed the microphone back and forth and literally moved around the entire room, concretely demonstrating that there was no podium front and center, but that power (as embodied in the speaker) can move throughout the space. This was further reinforced in presenting guidelines for shared self-management in small-group discussions.

I mention these relatively minor details in the overall planning and facilitation of a future search simply to call attention to the power of transparency. In this case, our role as facilitators was to model and reinforce a congruence between message (i.e., the principles of future search) and our behavior as facilitators. We wanted the participants to similarly experience an alignment between what they are

told they can expect (i.e., the agenda and process) and what was actually happening. More than one participant commented to me afterward how this beginning dramatically signaled to them that this process was going to be different from what they had previously experienced or had come to the conference expecting.

Again, though this may be a regular feature of many future search

events, I think it was particularly important in this instance, representing as it did a U.S.-Mexican collaboration at so many levels. As the

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facilitators, Eva and I were very intentional about what we communicated in our partnership. Though I was the lead consultant in the project, she and I shared all the aspects of the work in front of the planning group and conference community. More than simply modeling teamwork, we were also sensitive to balancing the content of messages regarding leadership, meeting norms, and time management in such a way as to complement our distinct personalities and cultural approaches.

I will note that in a couple of instances when—as a factor of time pressure and tiredness—Eva and I lost this “team connection,” I suspect the whole group’s experience worked less well. For example, at the conference’s end, I chose a closing ritual that was tight and to the point (*americana* that I am). In doing so, I did not anticipate the participants’ need to talk at length about the whole experience and reinforce all the good connections and feelings that had been established. The quality and ritual of *la despedida* (goodbye) were obviously much more important to the community than ending “on time.” This blunder on my part was at least partially allayed when a young person in the group proposed, and everyone joined into a second joyful, contactful ending.

Time management had been one of the specific challenges that Eva and I had anticipated. We knew we needed to balance the fluid approach to time boundaries in Mexican culture and the demanding task requirements of the future search agenda. Our approach was to address this topic gently but directly in the planning group and conference community.

Jointly, we and the planning group agreed to allot more time to the agenda (20 hours instead of 16), leave ample time for the traditional mid-afternoon meal, start when we said we’d start, and explicitly hold up the challenge of time and task to

the conference participants. Together, with the use of Tibetan chimes to convene participants, these strategies resulted in smooth, on-time beginnings and endings throughout the conference (including the ending).

Though discussions like these did contribute to highly detailed and sometimes lengthy planning sessions, I believe they did substantively contribute to a deeper understanding by the planning committee of the principles and practices of future search, and ultimately helped everyone to more generally share responsibility for time management and leadership.

At the risk of overstatement, shared responsibility and transparency are not givens in most people’s experiences of most organizations or conferences, certainly not in my own experience in the United States.

What struck me again and again during the year I lived in Mexico was how many people I spoke with in business, NGOs, and academic circles expressed interest in creating greater institutional transparency. This desire for transparency was often cited as one of the significant challenges inherent in the current process of political change occurring in Mexico. (This change was most dramatically marked when the political party that had controlled Mexican government for 70 years, and essentially dominated all of its key institutions, lost the presidency in July 2000.)

I am interested in exploring the idea that the facilitation practices associated with future search may be particularly relevant in a context in which people already have an awareness of the value (and preciousness) of transparency and direct democracy.

Recognizing the Impact of Direct Democracy

Direct democracy, or the idea that no one is charged with representing a point of view, experience, or commitment other than one’s own, is explicit in future search. (This is in contrast to representational democracy, in which individuals are called upon to contribute to a deliberative process as representatives of a

particular perspective or interest group.) Though not called direct democracy as such in future search literature, this principle is introduced early on in the planning process when the planning group must determine which stakeholder groups and individuals need to be involved in addressing the conference theme. Part of this process usefully includes a discussion of the nature of participation in the conference and expectations of the invitees.

In my consulting practice with NGOs in the

United States, I have noticed that culturally diverse organizations with a high level of participation by young adults (i.e., the generation now in their 20s and early 30s) often dedicate significant time and attention to soliciting and considering everyone’s perspective in decision making. This mode of deliberation and decision making emphasizes clarifying ownership and power relationships and achieving consensus.

In the reproductive health future search in Mexico, I believe that the consistently most significant contribution youth made was to effectively deepen and personalize the large-group dialogues. One example of this was a powerful moment in a large-group dialogue when a federal

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legislative deputy made a plea for greater political participation by youth. Here, a young woman responded in clear, direct language that in her personal experience there were few forums that included young people, and that “we need spaces for us to speak and act and make our own mistakes as you have done.” This was one of a number of exchanges that ratcheted the dialogue to a deeper level because everyone’s voice could be heard.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that though Mexicans in general demonstrate deference to hierarchy and social class, this is more than offset by the value they place on good conversation and warm personal rapport. In the context of the future search, this contributed to generally spontaneous, lively discussions in both small and large groups—and perhaps to the exchange cited above.

Conclusion

Though themes of ownership, transparency, and direct democracy underlie much of the practice of future search, I found that they were particularly relevant in my work on this project in Mexico. There, as elsewhere, the issues and challenges associated with reproductive health and sexual rights are imbedded in unequal, oppressive power relationships. Yet in the context of this conference, the partners in planning and the conference participants created a space in which they experienced a comparatively greater degree of shared ownership and leadership. My sense is that the principles and structures of future search supported us all in creating concrete, reasonably equitable ways of working together. **FS**

West Coast FS Meeting — July 18

Shelley Sweet

We invite all members of the West Coast Future Search Network to join us at a meeting in Sacramento on July 18. It will be hosted by Lisa Beutler.

There is a lot to be said for task-oriented group development and working collaboratively in an effort to build community capacity for collaboration. We will do some good work and have a good time doing it! Here’s what we hope to do:

1. Reconnect with and recommit to our colleagues: The April meeting was quite “intimate” (three members). We noticed that when we have a task or activity to focus on, we generate lots more energy and participation. When the West Coast training got postponed, we saw a falloff in energy (possibly connected to the travel schedule of some of our committed members and the dulling impact of the war and the economy). So we have decided to recommit ourselves to the task of generating interest for collaborative change work in the community, testing a strategy of engaging foundations and other funders as partners.

2. Develop our strategy for engaging funders interested in community collaboration to partner with us in building the capacity in the community for large-scale, principle-based change:

- Describe the strategy clearly and develop “the case”;
- Identify funders interested in fostering collaboration among their grantees and in the communities/sectors they serve;
- Form teams to contact likely funders about their interest and how we can help;
- Develop a preliminary, scalable design for presenting whole-

system change methodologies, including Future Search, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry, etc. This would include a 90-minute, half-day, and full-day version.

- Begin to identify cases to support each format of presentation, based on our own experiences and those in the Future Search, Open Space and Appreciative Inquiry resource banks.
- Set dates for presentations in October/November, the time frame based on who wants to make these presentations in each area.

3. We will bring lists of funders from the Bay Area, Sacramento region, and LA/Orange County region who identify themselves as interested in fostering collaboration among their grantees and in the communities they serve. If you know any funders or grantee organizations that fit this description, bring their names, and if you can, bring some of their staff. We can use the real-world input from our target audience—getting the whole system in the room.

We invite all members of the West Coast Future Search Network to join us in this meeting. There is a lot to be said for task-oriented group development and working collaboratively in an effort to build community capacity for collaboration.

Our gathering will begin with networking and light breakfast at 9:00 a.m. We will begin the meeting at 10:00 a.m. sharp and adjourn by 4:00 p.m.

Please RSVP to Shelley Sweet, shelleysweet@sbcglobal.net, 650-493-1300. **FS**