

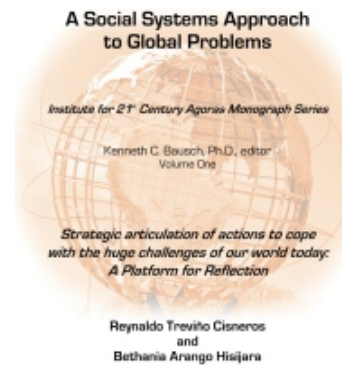
INVITED COMMENT for

A SOCIAL SYSTEMS APPROACH FOR GLOBAL PROBLEMS

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Volume One:

[Strategic Articulation of actions to cope with the huge challenges of our world today: A Platform for reflection](#)



A Mission Impossible or The Needed Critical Piece of the Puzzle?

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This [project and publication](#) launched by Reynaldo Treviño Cisneros and Bethania Arango Hisijara could be characterized as “mission impossible”; and the authors are aware of it, while the endeavour deserves merit. What are the alternatives for times when we have overextended our foot- and handprints?

Some argue that we just need to reduce the world population drastically; the densities and pressures will be less, and so we could muddle through as usual. In this case, they believe we can re-start from square one with a healthy sustainable civilization by just reducing “numbers” but inflicting unprecedented suffering. Others believe in swarm intelligence and simulations, which would use and capitalize on all available data, information and knowledge. Such a “Global Earth Simulator” would then create out of all the “mess” and “noise” the blue-print for policy development and crisis management. The amount of suffering involved, and the loss of individual and cultural autonomy, are mind-staggering. We would lose our stake for a democratic harmonious development. We would be forced to stumble down the delusional path of “unrealistic optimism.”¹

I have known proponents of many extremes and wonder why, for example, population-reduction fans have not studied harmonious life-styles, and sustainable civilizations through the ages, where different attitudes towards the Earth secured much larger population-densities — even when that would not be desirable. I wonder on the other hand how “trend extrapolators” can assume that the noise and rubbish of complexity run amok can be modeled and moulded by a “super-intelligent” system. Will machines generate humane, value-based policies for the best of all humankind? Discussions about the value of models, scenarios, and symptoms have raged for 40 years ever since the first Club of Rome World Models. Has no one followed these discussions? Please see the synopsis in interviews and the event with Alexander Christakis, Yiannis Laouris, Reynaldo Treviño Cisneros, and others.²

Treviño and Arango were walking into a terra incognita, marked by a welter of outcomes proposed by different objectives, perspectives, expertise, and degrees of synthesis. People more famous than they had foundered in the global problematique. They began with an awareness of the 49 Continuous

¹ How unrealistic optimism is maintained in the face of reality. Shrot T, Korn CW, Dolan RJ. Source: Welcome Trust Centre for Neuroimaging, University College London, Nat Neurosci. 2011 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21983684

² Interviews with Alexander Christakis in Europe’s World: 40 years Problematique: <http://goo.gl/QqYsqY> and [The Predicament of the Individual, Communities, and Humankind in the 21st Century](http://goo.gl/PT5ZY0) <http://goo.gl/PT5ZY0>

Critical Problems (CCPs) identified by Hasan Özbekhan in 1970 and added the 15 Challenges to Humanity identified by the Millennium Project. Then they were on the way to make sense of the global mind-boggling mess using the Structured Dialogic Design (SDD) methodology formulated by Alexander Christakis and others. Congratulations for this trail-blazing effort.

We all agree that the problem spaces have “exploded” and leave us with unpredictable repercussions. We have numerous lists of problems, but the question is: How are they connected? Can we identify root-causes with leverage-points³, places where we can intervene in systems to make a difference for the better instead of staring at all the tipping points where earth-systems dynamics get out of control?⁴

We also agree that all stakeholders cannot be brought to one room at one time to uncover the deep meanings that people are typically not aware of, or to anticipate future consequences. So what to do? Make more embryonic steps like the one commended here.

What is our future as futurists? Are we to continue doing business as usual expecting newer technology to create more positive results? What of new approaches that work with broad participation, rich definitions, abductive reasoning, and structured dialogue? Can they find their rightful place in the local, national, and global dialogue? What can we do to advance this new approach?

There are numerous signs that we as the people have a heightened interest in global/local issues across scales and times, issues like climate change, hunger, population, water availability, ethics, and alienation, and there is a heightened, intense desire to find root causes for these complex and interrelated issues. Some examples:

- The charter of the Millennium Development Goals asks us to address root causes and come to “win, win, win” situations so that solving one problem will help us solve others. The ability of ISM to map influence relations among issues and find root causes fits that requirement.
- The Millennium Project has amassed an immense store of information and collected 15 Challenges to Humanity for open access and discussions within the community and managed each by an editor.
- Organizations such as the ONLIFE Think Tank⁵ of the Digital Futures Task Force of the European Commission have placed great focus on the need to re-imagine the concept of democracy, along with other concepts such as distributed responsibility, privacy etc.

We have numerous opportunities to provide and publicize SDD interventions, in addition to this one, that will demonstrate SDD’s greater utility at a cost of minus 2 orders of magnitude.

Most of the past successes of SDD have been in the corporate sector with some notable exceptions, such as: the Third Iberoamerican Encounter about Communication Strategies (Mexico)⁶; and the work done by Christakis with the US Federal Drug Administration, and the World Health Organization⁷. Future monographs and articles will proclaim SDD successes at the conceptual, educational, and policy levels.

³ Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System, Donella Meadows
http://www.sustainer.org/pubs/Leverage_Points.pdf

⁴ I recommend the International Encyclopedia of Systems and Cybernetics and the presentation by the founding editor when introducing the 2nd edition: benking.de/systems/encyclopedia/concepts-and-models.htm

⁵ ONLIFEec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-original-outcome and www.futureworlds.eu/wiki/Reinventing_democracy and [CARDIAC cardiac-eu.org](http://CARDIAC.cardiac-eu.org)

⁶ III Encuentro Iberoamericano sobre Estrategias de Comunicación, México, 2005: www.fisecforo.org/index.php

⁷ Christakis A., Bausch KC 2006. *How People Harness Their Collective Wisdom and Power to Construct the Future in Co-Laboratories of Democracy*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing <http://www.globalagoras.org/publications/co-laboratories-of-democracy/>