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SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES vs. CYCLES OF VICIOUS PROBLEMS 240,000 Hyperlinks on CD-ROM

Much effort has gone into the focus on seemingly isolated world problems, such as unemployment, boredom, endangered species, desertification or corruption. Work on the newly published **Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential** has now shifted its focus to the hunt for vicious **cycles of problems**. A cycle is a chain of problems, with each aggravating the next ~ with the last looping back to aggravate the first in the chain. The more obvious loops may be composed of only 3 or 4 problems. Far less obvious are those composed of 7 or more. An example is: *Alienation -> Youth gangs -> Neighbourhood control by criminals -> Psychological stress of urban environment -> Substance abuse -> Family breakdown -> Alienation*. Such cycles are vicious because they are self-sustaining. Identifying them is also no easy matter. Like the search for strange particles in physics, much computer time is required to track through the aggravating chains linking problems. A preliminary search along 9 million such pathways has so far identified 19,000 cycles composed of up to 7 problems.

Organizational strategies and programmes that focus on only one problem in the chain tend to fail because the cycle has the capacity to regenerate itself. Worse still is that such cycles tend to interlock, creating the complex of global problems which causes so many to despair. The good news is that identifying vicious cycles is a first step towards designing **cycles of strategies** to reverse or break them. Better still some problems are linked by serendipitous cycles in which each problem alleviates the next.

Volume 1 of the 3-volume Encyclopedia (now in its 4th edition) currently describes 9,836 **world problems** clustered into 320 overlapping hierarchies in 1,200 pages. The problems are linked by some 120,000 relationships of 7 types. Problems included are those identified in international periodicals but especially in the documents of some 15,000 international non-profit organizations (profiled in the companion 3-volume **Yearbook of International Organizations**, now in its 32nd edition). The Encyclopedia includes problems which such groups choose to perceive and act upon, whether or not their existence is denied by others claiming greater expertise. Indeed such claims and counter-claims figure in many of the problem descriptions in order to reflect the often paralyzing dynamics of international debate. In the light of the interdependence demonstrated among world problems in every sector, emphasis is placed on the need for approaches which are sufficiently complex to encompass the factions, conflicts and rival worldviews that undermine collective initiative towards a promising future.

Both the Encyclopedia and the Yearbook are ongoing programmes of the Union of International Associations. As a nonprofit research institute, founded in Brussels in 1910, it now functions as a clearing house for information on other international nonprofit organizations, whether governmental or nongovernmental.

Volume 2 of the Encyclopedia contains the most comprehensive description of the variety of approaches to **human development**. While their intention may be to alleviate suffering, paradoxically their blinkered pursuit is often a prime cause of world problems, notably in the case of religious conflict. Not only are there some 1,400 understandings of human development from the spiritual and psychological disciplines of different cultures and traditions, but also 3,050 modes of awareness or experience that are reported to be accessible through such disciplines, often through identifiable sequences or pathways. Buddhism offers the most elaborate perspective, requiring 1,360 interlinked entries.

The Encyclopedia takes an unusual approach to the range of **human values**. Rather than limiting its focus to the dozen values most frequently discussed (peace, justice, and the like), Volume 2 identifies 987 "constructive" or positive values as well as 1,990 "destructive" or negative values. The positive and negative values are clustered into 230 value polarities (like beauty-ugliness) to transcend the semantic confusion associated with many value-words. It is however the negative value terms which are used to sharpen the problematic nature of the problem names given in Volume 1. Negative values are systematically cross-referenced to both world problem names and to the complementary positive values (via the polarities). For the first time it becomes possible to trace the positive values in terms of which problems becomes perceptible. Also for the first time, values are cross-referenced to human development where particular approaches or experiences enhance the understanding of a particular value. The editors explore a variety of possibilities of organizing value terms as a prelude to any justification for the current preoccupation with so-called basic values.

Volume 3 of the Encyclopedia, published in October 1995, profiles over 9,200 linked **strategies** currently employed by international bodies, whether in response to world problems or to enhance particular values or modes of development. It also provide the first systematic identification of several thousand vicious problem cycles to which such strategies need to respond. It identifies **mutually reinforcing strategic cycles**.

Although it is still possible to gather and configure so much detail into book form (or onto the **CD-ROM version** of the Encyclopedia and Yearbook), the editors are much concerned with new ways of visualizing complex networks of relationships. The challenge is to find meaningful ways to navigate through such complexity and to evoke imaginative insights in response to it. In a section on transformative approaches, the editors explore the implications for computer graphics, transformative conferencing and the design of policy cycles capable of responding to vicious problem cycles.

Much emphasis is placed on the potential of **new metaphors for governance** as a major unexplored resource to enable paradigm shifts. The suggestion is made that many institutions and policies are trapped in inadequate policy metaphors. In this spirit the Encyclopedia even contains an extensive exploration of the relevance to governance of fruitful cross-fertilization between poetry-making and policy-making -- seen as equivalent to the mythical challenge of arranging a marriage between Beauty and the Beast.

The Encyclopedia offers radically different perspectives to policy-makers, social researchers and those concerned with development strategy. It is also fascinating reading for any individual with concern for human affairs and wary of the risks of "tunnel vision" in conventional approaches to crises and opportunities.

Most encyclopedias focus only on positive, sanitized aspects of society, presenting an idealized worldview that denies the shadow of humanity. This is one of the few even to mention the existence of such phenomena as corruption (96 entries), torture and many others that do not appear on the agendas of international conferences. It attempts to present the world as many experience it, whether negatively or positively.

Users of the Encyclopedia are encouraged to discover new approaches to understanding and action through the deliberate juxtaposition, within the same context, of contradictory perceptions and fundamentally incompatible viewpoints. By juxtaposing different, but complementary, perspectives, the Encyclopedia is deliberately designed to challenge unquestioned patterns of response to the crises of the times and to evoke new insights in the reader. In this sense it is full of shocks and creative surprises.

Union of International Associations (ed). Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential. Munich, K G Saur Verlag, 1994, 3 vols (ca. 3,000 pages), Price for set (or single volumes): DM 1,200 (DM 548.00); USA \$725.00 (\$245.00); UK £615 (£280). **CD-ROM version has 50,000 entries and 240,000 hyperlinks.**