

CONVENING THINKERS
AND DOERS:
SWEDEN'S DAG
HAMMARSKJÖLD
FOUNDATION

A chapter from *The Power of Convening: Collaborative
Policy Forums for Sustainable Development:
Proceedings of an international workshop held at
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Author's note: The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation is my favorite convening organization because its approach is similar to ours at the California Institute of Public Affairs and we have learned a great deal from observing the way it operates.

I first visited the foundation in 1984, while searching for interesting models of organizations that succeed in linking ideas to action. I returned in 1987 for long interviews with its director. This article is reprinted with a few changes from *The Power of Convening* (Sacramento: CIPA, 1990), the proceedings of an international workshop that CIPA held in cooperation with IUCN – The World Conservation Union and Claremont Graduate University. We are reissuing it as a separate paper and posting it on the Internet to help explain what we mean by convening and promote collaborative forums as a tool for improving public policy. Note that the facts given reflect the situation in 1989 and have not been updated. I appreciate Sven Hamrell's comments on an earlier version of this article.

For more information about CIPA's work in this area, visit www.cipahq.org and go to Online Papers. For current information about the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, visit www.dhf.uu.se.

“A good cash flow of ideas”

“We have a good cash flow of ideas,” Sven Hamrell says. He stresses the point by folding his arms and grinning at me over his glasses. He is sixtyish, of medium height, round face, thinning black hair, quiet eyes. He speaks with a lilting Swedish accent.

For more than twenty years, Sven Hamrell has directed the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, an organization concerned with issues of international development cooperation. “Development” is a word often surrounded by polemic; in its highest sense it means assuring people in every corner of the world of the means of survival and the elements of human dignity. The foundation was created in 1962 as Sweden’s national memorial to Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in a plane crash on a mission to the Congo.

Hammarskjöld was a remarkable man. His biographer, Sir Brian Urquhart, a Briton who worked closely with him and was UN Under Secretary General for many years, wrote on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hammarskjöld’s death that his “integrity, force of character, and intellect were combined with exceptional diplomatic skill, ingenuity, and persistence...I know of no other political leader who so effectively turned his intellectual gifts to the solution of practical problems.” Hammarskjöld was also a very private man who had a strong mystical side; he left behind the manuscript of a spiritual diary to be published after his death (called *Markings* in the English edition, it has sold over a half million copies).

The headquarters of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation are in Uppsala, forty-five miles directly north of Stockholm. Uppsala is one of the oldest towns in Sweden, and its university is the oldest in Scandinavia. The foundation’s offices are at the edge of the university campus in a wood mansion dating from the 1730s. Down the street is 16th century Uppsala Castle; a short way in the other direction is a tall Gothic cathedral. It is appropriate for the foundation to be located in Uppsala, because Dag Hammarskjöld grew up in Uppsala Castle as the son of the local governor and graduated from Uppsala University.

An organization created as the official memorial to a respected world figure has a kind of instant dignity. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation also gains from Sweden’s special role in international politics, a role that is far more important than its population of eight million would indicate. Historically neutral, Sweden does not belong to any of the world’s power blocs. But for years the Swedes have had an activist foreign policy, promoting arms control, championing human rights, and taking part in more UN

peacekeeping operations than any other country. The Swedes have had a strong interest in international development. Since 1975, their national policy has been to set aside an amount equivalent to one percent of the gross national product for aid to developing countries. They haven't always succeeded, but Sweden consistently ranks with the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark as one of the top donor countries in the world.

“In touch with the Universe!”

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation holds conferences, workshops, and seminars on issues facing developing countries. Meetings may seem frail weapons to use against poverty, ignorance, and injustice, but properly done they have power to clarify issues and mobilize people. The foundation holds from two to six meetings each year, both in Uppsala and developing parts of the world, and disseminates the results in a well-edited and attractively printed English-language journal called *Development Dialogue: A Journal of International Development Cooperation*. The journal is regularly sent to about eight thousand key people and organizations in the developing world and another six thousand in other countries; another five thousand or so are distributed to people who have a special interest in a particular subject. There are also occasional books and reports, and some material has been issued in other languages.

Sven Hamrell has been the foundation's director since 1967. His original plan was to be an academic scholar. He went to the United States to study political science and philosophy at Bowdoin College in Maine and stayed on to do graduate work at the New School for Social Research in New York City. This was in the late '40s – intellectually exciting times at the New School. While there, he got to know such figures as the leftist political writer Dwight Macdonald, literary critic Lionel Trilling, and the great conservative political philosopher Leo Strauss. (This exposure to diverse opinions probably helped give Hamrell an unusual ability to respect different points of view and a propensity to look for common ground.) He headed the African Institute in Uppsala before coming to the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. When he looks at friends of the same age who pursued conventional academic careers, he considers himself lucky: “They are now university administrators, I am in touch with the universe!”

To Americans, Swedes sometimes seem slow to warm to new acquaintances. There is a saying that a Swede is like a bottle of ketchup. First you get nothing, then nothing, then it all comes at once. Hamrell requires little shaking. He is animated, enthusiastic, open, candid. And, unlike many people in this line of work, he is a homebody, traveling only two months out of the year. He speaks often of his wife, Sonja Lyttkens, a mathematician and painter, and their five children.

Before Hamrell took its reins in 1967, the foundation conducted traditional training courses in diplomacy, economics, international law, and development planning. This soon began to change. First, Hamrell started organizing comprehensive projects that included research, meetings, and dissemination of results. Then, gradually, he began focusing on alternatives to the accepted ways of doing things. It was beginning to be clear to many people in the late '60's and early '70's that the problems of developing countries were all too poorly understood and that conventional development assistance had helped little on the ground and, in fact, often actually aggravated poverty and destroyed natural resources. During this period, the foundation started to explore new approaches to nutrition, child care, rural development, refugee problems, and international economic cooperation, and looked at the potential for film and correspondence instruction.

This early experience crystallized in what was called the 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Project on Development and International Cooperation. It was carried out as a crash project in less than five months to contribute to discussions at a special session on development of the United Nations General Assembly. Nonetheless, it was a serious and major undertaking, involving 120 leading scholars and policy-makers from many countries and major meetings in Uppsala, The Hague, Algiers, and New York. The project synthesized and gave structure to important earlier work, but drew conclusions based on its own studies as well. It was directed by Marc Nerfin, a Swiss who headed the International Foundation for Development Alternatives.

The main report of this project, which was called *What Now: Another Development*, forms the intellectual basis of the work of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. The report is written in plain and forceful language. What it calls "Another Development" is development that "is (1) Need-oriented – being geared to the satisfaction of man's needs, both material and nonmaterial; (2) Endogenous – stemming from the heart of each society, which defines in sovereignty its values and the vision of its future; (3) Self-reliant – relying on the strength and resources of the society which pursues it, rooted at the local level in the practice of each community; (4) Ecologically sound – utilizing rationally available resources in a harmonious relation with the environment; (5) Based on structural transformations – originating in the realization of the conditions for self-management and participation in decision-making by all."

These were meant to be very general guidelines, and it was understood that, as with any list of principles, there would be conflicts among them. Hamrell sees "Another Development" as cutting across all of the usual ideological categories, including capitalism and socialism.

Since the mid-'70s, the foundation has concentrated on elaborating the

theory and practice of “Another Development” in health, law, education, finance, energy, urban renewal, community participation, human rights, and many other fields, and in specific countries and regions of the developing world.

Success stories: Information policy

I am sitting with Hamrell in a cozy lounge on the second floor of the foundation’s headquarters. This is my second trip to Uppsala and it is early fall; through a large window I can see red leaves dropping from some maple trees in a courtyard. The house has spacious offices, a conference room with a couple of dozen chairs around a long table, and a small library containing a selection of international documents and journals of political opinion. On the walls are sketches by Hamrell’s artist wife, bright woven pieces from Africa and South America; and some photographs by Dag Hammarskjöld of Swedish mountain and coastal scenes.

I ask Hamrell what accomplishments he is most proud of. The foundation’s work in information policy is one. In 1975, when they were about to release the report, *What Now: Another Development*, Hamrell and Nerfin weren’t sure how to go about getting the right kind of publicity. Their original idea was to hold a traditional press conference at the United Nations in New York, but they thought the reporters from Western countries who dominate the UN press corps would pan the report or ignore it. They decided instead to hold a special seminar limited to journalists from developing countries.

Then, Hamrell and Nerfin discovered there were only a handful of journalists from the developing world who regularly covered United Nations affairs. They ended up paying travel expenses to New York for ten journalists from Algeria, Chile, India, Pakistan, Peru, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Venezuela. Presumably, the journalists sent home some good articles. More importantly in the long run, they got to know each other and agreed on a statement that eventually led to change.

The journalists’ main finding was that there was a “near-monopoly” of international communications by transnational corporations, and that such companies dominated, or at least influenced, almost all communications media in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. What this means is best shown by example. In a paper prepared for the New York seminar, Fernando Reyes Matta of the Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies reported on a study he made of a representative sample of sixteen leading newspapers from fourteen countries in Latin America. He determined that 62 percent of the international news items they printed came from UPI, AP, and other North American sources, and another 32 percent from European agencies. Reyes chose November 25, 1975 for his study, the day on which Suriname became independent from The Netherlands. None of the papers he

surveyed considered the event important enough to send a special correspondent. Most of them simply printed a UPI dispatch, often on an inside page. A key Brazilian paper, *O Estado de São Paulo*, gave more importance to stories about a New York jewelry robbery, the situation in the Western Sahara, and the development of the Soviet Far East – even though Brazil has a common border with Suriname. Reyes asked: “How is it that the declaration of independence of a country as large as Uruguay or Ecuador... received so little attention in the Latin American press?” Moreover, he claimed, there was a consistent bias in the content of news about Latin America coming from press agencies in the industrialized countries: colonial stereotypes were perpetuated; conflict was emphasized (it has more “news value” than cooperation); economic news stressed the protection of foreign investments, the flow of natural resources to the outside world (bauxite in the case of Suriname), and other issues of interest to North Americans and Europeans. Reyes concluded: “Whereas the region is significantly ignorant of its own realities, it is flooded by information which is either irrelevant or has little bearing on its future. Similarly, there is much ignorance about what is happening in other Third World regions.”

The journalists recommended setting up an information service to serve developing country needs. One eventual result was a daily news bulletin covering issues before the United Nations from a developing-country perspective. This *Special United Nations Service*, also known as the “Yellow Sheet,” was started in 1981 and published for almost a decade by Marc Nerfin’s Geneva-based International Foundation for Development Alternatives, in cooperation with a consortium of developing-country journalists, Inter Press Service. Regrettably, it has now ceased publication for lack of funding.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation held more meetings on information policy over the next few years, including two conferences that explored how to encourage homegrown book publishing industry in Africa. African book publishing has been dominated by big European publishing houses that have not always been sensitive to cultural differences (the “Africanization” of western textbooks was summed up by a Nigerian librarian as follows: “although Jack and Jill may be metamorphosed into Okeke and Ada, they may be found still drinking their pint of milk every morning”). Again, the foundations’ involvement wasn’t limited to convening a meeting or issuing a declaration. Hamrell, following up on conference recommendations, helped set up an independent revolving fund in Kenya that is providing guaranteed loans to aspiring indigenous publishers. The foundation is represented on the board of this organization and will continue to look for ways of being of assistance in the same way in other African countries.

The influence that transnational corporations have over communications media in the developing world has sometimes been an excuse for imposing

government controls. The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has consistently worked for pluralism and diversity in communications. "This implies," Hamrell has written, "that the means to communicate – be they editorial, technical, or financial in nature – should be available to all sectors of society, and that no particular group, whatever its values or constituency, should be in a position to control a predominant share of the flow." He thinks his organization has had a positive influence on the sometimes-acrimonious international debate about government control of the media.

But influencing a debate about abstract principles is one thing; having an effect on the ground is quite another. In Africa, the foundation is trying to encourage "autonomous" publishing in a continent dominated by one-party states and military dictatorships. There was little discussion at the foundation's 1984 seminar on African publishing about the problems of state censorship or self-censorship from fear of reprisal. For those at the meeting, "autonomous" publishing seems to have meant passing economic control to local shareholders or government authorities; "democracy" meant cultural independence. Words sometimes signify different things in the developing world. It will be interesting to see whether the new loan fund can help to start a few truly independent publishing houses in Africa. Perhaps the foundation can only plant some seeds.

Success stories: Health policy

Another success story Hamrell is fond of relating is a 1977 meeting on global health. By that time, the international community had at least talked a great deal about other basic needs – food, housing, and education – but health had not become a priority in the same sense. The foundation thought that health should be viewed as an integral part of individual and social development. The key would be direct community involvement in health decisions. These were somewhat radical ideas. Health has been the exclusive preserve of a professional class, the medical profession. Unlike other policy issues, health issues have not been an active concern of the larger community. The foundation's project aimed at breaking down the barriers.

Hamrell brought together seventeen carefully selected people for a five-day seminar on "Another Development in Health" in Uppsala in June 1977. The participants included social scientists, medical doctors, and policy-makers from Argentina, Guinea-Bissau, India, Mexico, Mozambique, Norway, Sweden, Tanzania, the United States, and Zambia, as well as the World Health Organization. The seminar was directed by two M.D.s from Sweden and India.

The papers presented there illustrate how the foundation conducts its meetings; the speakers represented a diversity of viewpoints and drew

largely from practical experience: Valentina Borremans, a Mexican colleague of Ivan Illich (who had worked with him on his book, *Medical Nemesis*, a highly critical analysis of western health care, argued that there are as many kinds of health as there are cultures; she called for letting people determine their own health needs, rather than trying to impose “universal health” which creates a dependency. Eleuther Tarimo, a senior Tanzanian health official, talked about his country’s experience with an official health policy of self-reliance, and the potential (and limits) of traditional medicine. D. Banerji, a professor of medicine from India, related how colonialism destroyed India’s traditional health culture and imposed a western system of medicine that was inappropriate to the country’s needs; he linked people-oriented health services to a “just social order.” Zafrullah Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi M.D., told how his pioneering rural health center links health care to nutrition and family planning. Other speakers gave accounts of projects in rural Finland and a black ghetto in Chicago.

The participants concluded that there should be a “redefinition” of the health-care concept: “Health is a human condition which cannot be ‘delivered’ by health-care systems. No lasting improvement can be achieved through development of medical services alone. Health is the responsibility of the individual, the community, and the government as a whole. It is therefore ultimately a political question. In some countries, significant changes in health will be possible only through fundamental social and economic change.” Their statement also called for “total trust in people’s own ability to cope with their health problems, to express their felt needs, and to decide their health-care priorities. Trusting the people means that health care must start with the people. It means respect for people’s own healing practices until better alternative methods which are acceptable to them are found.”

These were not entirely original ideas (Ivan Illich, for one, had been thinking along these lines for several years), but Hamrell’s timing was excellent. The seminar served as a catalyst, bringing some important thinkers together with a few decision-makers who were ready to listen to new approaches. Among those present was Halfdan Mahler, a Dane who was then Director-General of the World Health Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations whose annual budget of about \$375 million is directed mainly toward helping developing countries improve their health-care systems.

The following year, WHO held a major intergovernmental conference on primary health care, in Alma-Ata, in then-Soviet Kazakhstan. The conference ended with the delegates voting for a major shift in WHO’s focus, away from a traditional preoccupation with traditional medical issues to devoting more attention to social and environmental causes of illness and promoting indigenous health resources. The “Declaration of Alma-Ata,” as it became known, also included the statement that “The people have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and

implementation of their health care.” These are now among the basic principles that guide the World Health Organization.

It is rarely possible to trace the intellectual descent of a policy decision to one source, but Hamrell believes the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation’s 1977 seminar had a crucial role in changing the direction of international health policy.

“We have a lot of friends and we drink together”

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation has a budget of about \$750,000 a year and – at least until recently – few worries about raising funds; it has an endowment and regular appropriations from the Swedish government. But the organization is able to accomplish many things with this money and does so with a staff of only two professionals (Hamrell and associate director Olle Nordberg, who has been there nearly as long) and two full-time and one half-time secretaries.

This is even more remarkable because the staff is constantly shifting focus from one subject to another. In one recent year, for example, the foundation held a workshop in Kenya on publishing, a seminar in Uppsala on pharmaceuticals, and a meeting in Lesotho on development in southern Africa. It also helped to organize three separate workshops in Chile and Brazil on economic aspects of “development on a human scale.” Two numbers of *Development Dialogue* were issued, totaling 365 pages, as well as a French translation of papers on women’s role in development.

Hamrell prefers a small organization. That way, “there are no personnel problems – we all know each other,” he said. Smallness also gives flexibility; none of his projects has really failed, he explained, because he can make adjustments quickly. He and Nordberg work hand in glove (“He knows everything I know and I know everything he knows”) and they spend a full hour every day having coffee with the secretaries to share information.

When I first met Hamrell, I asked him how his little group was able to do so much. He was only half-joking when he replied, “We have a lot of friends and we drink together.”

“Choosing the right people is half the job”

The foundation seems more like a club than an institution, although it has the usual board of trustees, distinguished advisory committee, and other formal trappings. Continuity is an important part of the formula. Many of the same people keep appearing in projects year after year: Marc Nerfin, for example; Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef, who runs the Development Alternatives Center in Santiago; and several Swedes. “We keep in touch all

the time,” Hamrell said. “We are loyal to each other. People remember their past history of working together. This is extremely valuable.”

The seminars and workshops are at the center of the process. Again, Hamrell likes to have a small group in which people can get to know each other. Twenty is the ideal size, he thinks, although he has had as many as thirty and as few as fourteen.

“Choosing the right people is half the job,” Hamrell told me. Who is invited depends on the matters to be discussed. The mix is important. What he wants is “thoughtful practitioners and practical-minded scholars,” always with a broad spectrum of viewpoints. A typical meeting will include people from government and politics, universities, independent institutes, and voluntary associations; there may also be journalists, church people, or doctors. Candidates are chosen mainly through the foundation’s network. Hamrell has tried to be more systematic by asking for nominations from institutions, but this hasn’t worked out very well.

The invitation list rarely includes people in top government positions. “We leave that to the large international organizations,” Hamrell said. However, when big names will help, the foundation has no trouble attracting them. In 1985, a seminar on “Another Development” in southern Africa was opened and attended by King Moshoeshoe II of Lesotho (Moshoeshoe, who was educated at Oxford, later asked the foundation to put on a special seminar in the royal palace on “Another Development” as it applies to the particular needs of his country.) And in 1986, three former presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela helped the foundation launch a new nongovernmental organization called the South American Commission for Peace, Regional Security, and Democracy, which works to reduce the military expenditures of South American governments to make more funds available for social purposes (this was done in cooperation with the Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies).

The foundation’s meetings usually last three or four days, although Hamrell has been experimenting with “phased seminars” that bring the same group together several months apart. The sessions are held in pleasant settings with good food and drink. Speakers are asked to draft “lead papers,” which take positions on issues and usually suggest some action to be taken; these are meant to stimulate discussion. The draft papers are reviewed by outside experts before the meeting.

The goal is always to have a frank exchange of opinion that is rarely possible in large or official forums. Hamrell also tries to achieve a consensus. “This is not as difficult as one might think,” he told me, “but we must be absolutely honest and we always take great care to ensure a democratic process.” The foundation will not reveal what goes on at a

meeting unless the speakers agree to it; this enables participants to speak candidly and is especially important for those from countries with authoritarian regimes. The agreed “summary conclusions” are edited for style back in Uppsala and then sent out to those who attended the meeting for final approval. These are eventually published in *Development Dialogue*, but their main purpose is to help the participants think. “They have more impact on the people who participated than on the world,” Hamrell said. “I’m not sure they are very much used. I don’t see them quoted very much, actually.”

In fact, the foundation gets little direct feedback. I suspect this is mainly because of the shifting nature of its program; the organization works as a catalyst in one field and then moves on to another. It never stays around long enough to be perceived as a resource on any single subject. Hamrell and his colleagues like to follow up on seminar recommendations – and can be quite aggressive in doing so – but only to a point. They avoid making continuing commitments. They would rather encourage other groups to take action, or help set up a new organization, as they did in the case of the African book publishing funds and the South American peace commission. “We do our thing,” Hamrell explained. Outreach “becomes a full-time job.” He would rather leave that to others.

When I asked Hamrell how he decides what to do next, he replied, “We basically work on hunches and intuitions. We use our network, and visitors come all the time. There are really too many good ideas. But, you know, I think if I tried to explain the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, I might spoil it. The foundation’s process is extraordinarily complex – very, very complex. And if we tried to inquire too deeply into how it works, into the secret of our success, it would not be a good thing. There is an intangible chemistry about it, a mystery. It wouldn’t be good to try to cut it apart.”

“Mystery,” “loyalty,” and “democracy” are words that Sven Hamrell uses often. If he were still alive, Dag Hammarskjöld would no doubt approve of the organization that bears his name.