Report VP Chapters - December 2010

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Background

I took over the VP Chapters under the presidency of Rogelio Oliva, who has made the chapter development one of his main goals. Part of my personal background is also the experience as Latinamerican chapter president, which had allowed some contact with the previous two VP Chapters.

In this context, I tried to establish contact with the chapters in order to ask them how the PC can help. This report gives some information concerning the responses and some other observations concerning the chapters. It then goes on to suggest a diagnosis and a plan.

Evidence of the current situation

All chapters have been invited to send in updates concerning their activities and their situations. The following ones have sent such updates:

Chapter	Commentary
UK	Appears to be an active chapter
Students	Appears to be an active chapter
German	Appears to be an active chapter
Australian	Appears to be an active chapter, in an effort to keep the chapter together despite the huge geographical area.
Latinamerican	Appears to be an active chapter despite the huge geographical area
Economics	Geographically disperse chapter with the challenge to maintain coordinated activities.
India	The chapter has set up a website, is approaching its firs annual meeting and reports a growing number of contacts with interested individuals.

Several of the chapters seem to be very active groups of people who have a stable set of activities and give an image of being rather self-sufficient. Beyond these chapters classified as "active", some chapters are in reorganization or formation:

- Brazil (moved in PC)
- Benelux (in process)

While the country-specific active chapters have different forms of local meetings on a rather frequent base, the Latinamerican chapter mainly has its yearly conference, which is due to the distance between members.

The economics chapter is not one of those chapters and appears in the table only because I happen to be its president and have written a report. The remaining chapters have not responded any of the e-mail calls.

A brief look at the web presence complements this information. The society's website has a section for chapter reports visible at:

http://www.systemdynamics.org/Governance.htm#Chapter%20Reports. The following chapters appear with reports for the years listed below:

- Australasian Chapter: 2001
- (Canada) National Capital System Dynamics Interest Group: 1999
- Chinese Chapter: 1997-2000
- Italian Chapter: 1999-2000
- Japanese Chapter: 1996-2003
- Swiss Chapter: 2004
- United Kingdom Chapter: 1999, 2001

Also, many chapters have websites which are linked from the society's chapter page:

Chapter	*Commentary*
Australasia	About 1/3 of the pages do not have content; apparently the activity update is from 2007.
Economics	Uses systemdynamics.org page; last visible update from 2008. There is a discussion group with moderate activity for members and a newly launched WordPress collaborative blog.
Egypt	Info dates from 2002
German	I German. Updated; newsletter bound to e-mail identification; member domain with log-in.
India	Updated; only contact information
Italian	Updated, rich in Italian information; newsletters until 2009
Japan	Japanese and English; English part mainly from 2004 and 2005
Latin America	There was an attempt to use systemdynamics.org website, but the chapter has its own network of local websites with updated info concerning activities and much translated material. Unlinked from the systemdynamics.org
Russian	Russian only, but seems updated and rich in content.
Student	Rich in content, updated, newsletter
Swiss	Updated
United Kingdom	Updated

The chapters of China, Greece, Korea and Pakistan do not appear to have a website.

No report of update was received from the chapters of Egypt, Italy, Japan, Russia and Switzerland.

According to information from the home office, several chapters have fallen below the minimum member number of 10: Pakistan (5), Egypt (8), and Russia (9). Two chapters have a representative who is not a member of the society: Nikos Pomonis (Hellenic Chapter): never been a member; Natalyia Lychkina (Russian Chapter) not a member since 2009.

Diagnosis

Country size, member density and chapter survival

The available information suggests that there are several classes of chapters: UK, Germany, Students, Latinamerica and Australia have a wealthy existence of their own and maintain a reasonable communication with the society (Brazil is very actively reorganizing and the Benelux group who strives to become a chapter is already acting as a group). A second class seems to have their own operations even though they do not currently communicate with the VP Chapters (Italy, Japan, Switzerland). Then there are those chapters who did not report, if they have web-presence it is outdated and there are member and representative problems (Pakistan, Egypt, Greece, Russia, China). It is not clear to me if the Economics chapter is to be counted to this last class.

Most of the chapters of the first class operate in countries with a small geographic extension and count on a large network of members. They would probably also exist and operate as group if the were not chapters of the society. An apparent exception – the Latinamerican chapter – also has a concentrated nucleus in Colombia, were the number of active members is astonishing (the Colombia community is capable of having 150 members in their national meetings). I believe the number of "really active" members is critical for the emergence and successful operation of a chapter. Geographical closeness seems also to be important, which is understandable: you are more likely to meet or to work together (the cost in time and money is lower).

It may be that there is a relationship between the minimum number of active members and the size of the territory: in Australia, Brazil, Russia and Latinamerica (and for the Economics chapter), if one imagines the density of members, it is not astonishing that the context between them is relatively loose and infrequent. It has to be taken into account that the pressure of the usual tasks in members' regular work raises the price of taking part in chapter activities.

So it is not clear if in a large country, an initial group of 10 members has the same chances to grow into a fully sized chapter as in a smaller country. I do not really have sufficient evidence to state this forcefully, but I find it sufficiently logical and coherent to suggest the hypothesis.

If a group of people has already found together and managed to have organized activities (the Benelux group), it is not hard to believe that they will succeed as a chapter. On the other hand, maybe new groups or groups with a higher density of new members (the Benelux group counts several long range society members), maybe we should accompany them more closely in the future.

Communication between society and chapters

I believe that in the present, we have lost communication with a large share of the officially existing chapters. I recall that during former international conferences, there used to be meetings of the VP Chapters with the whole set of chapters; I forgot if this still was the case at Boston (2007), but at the last two conferences such a meeting did not take place. Maybe I should have asked for them, since I was already the assistant to the former VP Chapters (who did not come to Albuquerque and to Seoul).

Currently, many chapters did not respond my messages. Probably it will be necessary to talk face-to-face in order to re-establish the possibility to maintain a fluent relationship by e-mail.

However, since the difficulties in maintaining and updating websites may in part stem from the time required to gather the information from other members, it may still be worthwhile to try making ourselves attractive with things that help saving time.

A plan

The following plan has two parts, one directed at the current chapters and the other at the future ones.

Current chapters

Reestablishing communication with current chapters.

Probably it is too late to plan a general chapters meeting for the 2011 international conference. However, the VP Chapters can call each of the chapters into a meeting in order to talk and straighten things out. We have to be able to offer help or ask for information and get a response. The response may be as short as "thanks, we are OK and do not need anything", but there should be a response.

I also believe it may be worthwhile to offer infrastructure like the mentioned collaborative newsletter-blog. This will not be attractive for chapters that already maintain a newsletter, but many do not (or have it outdated). As far as officers or webmasters did not have or receive the information to upload, if members cab directly post their information themselves, the workload per person is reduced. Of course, this requires the members to put in some minutes of their own time.

I would not bet a lot on that this will be a big success before the 2011 conference, but I believe it is a signal that we are serious about being supportive. However, probably the decisive moment will be during the conference, where we will need to tell the chapters that did not manage to have a reasonable degree of actuality in their web-presence, or a very low number of members, or virtually no activity as a chapter, that this is not a reasonable situation.

Until then, I will regularly attempt to get into touch with the representatives.

Disenfranchising unviable chapters

There may be chapters that do not manage to maneuver themselves into a viable situation in a reasonable delay. In my opinion, "viable situation" means:

1. not standing outside the agreed-upon rules laid down in the society's policies and in the chapter's constitutions;
2. having at least one regular chapter activity;
3. maintaining a (web) presence that does not harm the society or system dynamics.

I believe the problematic chapters should be informed about the fact that the society considers their situation as unsustainable and asks to make progress until the international conference. If this should turn out to be unachievable, and still not improve until the end of 2011, I would recommend the decision to disenfranchise these chapters.

For the future

Currently, there are indications concerning how to form a chapter at:

(http://www.systemdynamics.org/Chapter%20Reports/FormationOfAChapter.htm).

It does not seem advisable to complicate things by adding more rules or bureaucracy to this. On the other side, recognizing a new chapter proposed by 10 members is an act of trust in that they will succeed at diffusing the discipline. However, the degree of knowledge we have varies: some members have been there for years and have been active, others may be relatively new. The challenges facing them are not the same depending on how far they are apart from each other. Finally, they may already have a track record of joint activities or they may not have such a track record.

The recent reorganization of the Brazilian chapter and the initiative to form a Benelux chapter are two examples. In the case of Brazil, one might be inclined to say "if it did not work the last time, why would it now" but in the current group there are individuals who are very well-known for their contributions and this makes a huge difference. In the case of the Benelux group, the presence of several individuals who have made important contributions during years makes it very plausible that this would be a successful chapter.

If the decision process of the Policy Council takes these aspects into consideration when looking at a proposed chapter formation, we will be able to distinguish between cases where there is no reasonable doubt and the other cases. In the latter cases, it would be reasonable to

require a "first year plan" where planned activities are described and where the founding members describe how they plan to stabilize the chapter and make it grow. I believe it would be reasonable to have these new chapters report about the achievement of these goals and assess their "health" once a year.

This should be an internal policy; candidates to form chapters should be informed about the decision process. However, there should not be a formal rule for sanctioning or even disenfranchising chapters, the idea is rather to avoid situations like the one we are in now.

Finally: I propose to take some time trying to improve the relationship with chapters and to discuss the way chapter formation and reporting should be handled, and then take concrete decisions concerning policies during the summer meeting.