

VP Chapters - Update December 2011

December 21

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The situation in July 2011

As argued in the report from July, there seem to be diverse classes of Chapters, ranging from well-functioning and autonomous established ones (like UK, Germany, student, Latinamerican), dynamical new ones (India, Benelux, Brazil), others that seem to operate reasonably, others that we do not have frequent communication with (Korea, China) and eventually some that seem to have broken apart (Egypt, Greece, Pakistan).

As reported, the conference has been the opportunity to find out that some of the chapters who seemed to be out of touch are indeed very well-organized and autonomous (Korea, China).

From July to December

After being notified of their current status, the groups from Egypt and Pakistan told me they wished to re-launch their Chapter. The Egypt group has sent me a list of founding members, a new constitution (which is aligned to the standard constitution the Society proposes) and they have determined their officers – therefore I am about to propose the recognition of the renewed Egypt Chapter.

After the Italian Chapter, the India and the China Chapters have expressed their interest in applying for the Capacity Development Fund (CDF), and they received the new guidelines and my offer to give more explanations as needed.

All the Chapters have been kindly invited to give me an update – specially the Brazil Chapter which has hosted the first Capacity Development workshop. Up to this day (December 22), only the UK and the Latin American Chapters replied. The UK Chapter gives a brief of their coming meeting (which has also been informed via the newsletter messages). The Latin American annual conference has been held together with the Brazilian one this year, and 12 dynamicists from the Spanish speaking part of Latin America were there.

I regret that despite the reiterated invitation to report some essential information about the Brazil workshop, I have (to this day) only received the information that there have been 15 participants and the promise that such a report will be sent soon. Of course, I keep insisting and I will share any incoming information as soon as I receive it.

The expressed intent to build a Baltic Chapter has so far not yielded results.

From December on

Revisiting the July diagnosis

During the first half of the year, we were mainly preoccupied with those Chapters that gave signals of weakness or decay and with bringing some “discipline” into the communication and reporting.

We also promoted the CDF as the main tool how the mother Society intends to be support for its Chapters. The fact to have expressions of interest from several of those Chapters that may have been in the center of the intention (far away from the USA and Europe) may suggest that the CDF will be used by the Chapters that could need it.

From here on

Therefore, one could think that the course of events from July on confirms the diagnosis we had made then. In my opinion, the CDF should be continued during 2012 in order to find out if this idea diffuses across Chapters.

However, a doubt has developed on my mind concerning the relationship between mother Society and Chapters. It seems to me that the “strong” chapters provide the “Mother Society” with a kind of “positive externality” without receiving something specific in return (beyond the usual member services any full member receives anyway). These Chapters have their governance, their activities and their website and they operate like a local network which is only loosely coupled with the mother Society. Is this a desirable state? Or do we wish to provide them with something they could find useful?

There was a brief communication with Kim Warren about that theme, and it was suggested that a common Internet platform might be an attractive feature. In this sense, it has to be said that the Society provides the possibility to have own pages on the main website, but only the Economics and the Latinamerican Chapters make some use of it (and the Student Chapter has a “twiki” in the Society’s Internet domain).

In order to be a desirable thing for both Chapters and the people doing the work on behalf of the mother Society, a central Internet platform would have to reduce the amount of work for the Chapters without augmenting it for the “home office”. If there is a way to achieve this, I’d certainly have to ask the “strong” chapters (who have extensive websites) under which circumstances they would “move” to such a centralized solution.

There may also be something to be considered regarding Chapters from countries with other alphabets (there are quite a few) and how a sufficient flow of material is to be assured in the case of more absent chapters. For instance, in the realm of the Economics Chapter it was proposed to use a WordPress collaborative Blog such that members can post their news directly – however, most members at the July meeting preferred not to go this way, and the Blog was suspended; I’ve not deleted it, you can look at it at <http://economicdynamics.wordpress.com/>, but I’ll take it down at the end of 2011.

I believe that initiatives like the “case repository” – without being aimed mainly at Chapters – provide quite a lot of help (also) to Chapters. Another example that comes to mind are the free materials that may be found on diverse web pages out of control (of the Society): model repositories like the one by Tom Fiddaman and also repositories of simulations (FORIO). The Wiki (http://www.systemdynamics.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page) appears to have disappeared (I recall it was not very well fed): would not such kind of materials provide a helpful infrastructure?

I have the intuition that strong Chapters do not need help, and help can hardly be given to weak chapters: the whole idea of Chapters seems to be based upon the assumed existence of a critical mass of individuals who have the will to act as a Chapter. If this were so, then I’d find the motto “the Chapters are the Society’s future” a dangerous idea, because the Society would then depend upon something it cannot really influence.

In this case, the share of “full members” inside a Chapter may be an important variable, since the Society can expect full members to cling to the mother Society and observe the agreed rules. Also in this case, using the Society’s means to provide infrastructure services may become a tool to maintain (or improve) a bond between Society and local groups in general (and also Chapters).

In my opinion, some more dialogue about the relationship between the mother Society and its various local groups (including the SIGS) would allow to see more clearly how to move forward. However, this goes beyond the VP Chapters.

As for the VP Chapters, I propose two activities between now and July 2012:

1. help to determine which kind of “infrastructure services” (that does not exist now) would be helpful for Chapters and local groups in order to come up to the Summer meeting with a concrete plan for the next term;
2. persuade the Chapters to make use of a “start here” webpage on the Society’s site (and which would observe some shared design features such as to convey a feeling of unity), have the reports updated on the Society’s site.