Summary remarks for the Institute

The five days of the Institute on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters were intense and, often, far-ranging. As is often the case in such discussions, too many good ideas go by too quickly and there is a danger of forgetting them and of loosing the thread of continuity among them!

The Institute was greatly aided in averting this danger by the careful, coherent and forward-looking summary comments made by Thomas Franklin. The editors of the volume decided that it was important to include these here, for the readers of these ideas as well as the participants, because of their synthesis of many of the ideas that have gone before and because they suggest future directions for those of us concerned in working in the disaster/development continuum.

Institute on Education for Development in the Context of Disasters: Summary Remarks

Thomas Franklin

PACT, Inc.

First, some brief introductory comments. The aim of this Institute has been to bring together theoreticians and practitioners in the fields of disaster research, Third World education, humanitarian relief, and development planning. This it has done, and done well.

My objective is to synthesize what happened during this exciting Institute, and to make some suggestions as to the process for following up on this week. These suggestions will not be in the form of specific next steps. That, it seems to me, is a job for the whole group. But my suggestions will attempt to set some terms of reference for the process of deciding on those next steps.

Second, the issues that we have considered here are literally those of life and death. We must never lose sight of that fact or of our moral responsibility to deal with it to the best of our limited ability. To a very real degree, this must be the bottom line for volunteers, professionals, and educators in this field.

Third, our ideals are by definition ambitious, and by the same token, more likely to be frustrated than to be met.

Fourth, we have neither the luxury nor time to develop perfect answers. The scale and pace of the onset of crisis conditions in the world is rapidly outstripping the coping mechanisms that are in place both locally and internationally. Particularly in Africa, we all know that a prolonged emergency is already a reality. We all know the probability of death and suffering on a massive scale.

This Institute, if it has taught us anything, has taught us that we can and must increase our options, improve our performance, and optimize the use of scarce local and international resources.

Unfortunately, these things are easier said than done. They are enormously complex tasks that require the skills that all too often we do not have, resources that all too often may only be available to us at the cost of stringent conditions, and international agreements that may not be feasible at the present time.

The sombre tone of these opening remarks provides a backdrop for some brighter conclusions. This Institute has been helpful for all of us, without exception. The challenge for us now is to make it more useful, and to take advantage of the time and money that has been invested in it. I would like to suggest some ways in which we could enhance its usefulness.

First, we need some clarity and discipline in the use of our words. We must avoid euphemisms. But confusion can be avoided if we discipline ourselves in the use of the word "disaster." Our main conclusion here is that disasters and development are stages of the same process, but there are events within that process which can trigger crises involving widespread death and destruction. During the Institute we fell into the trap of using the word "disaster" when what we really meant was "crisis event."

Second, we can take advantage of traditional wisdom from the countries in which we have worked, to encapsulate ambiguities which have plagued, enriched, and challenged our discussion. I will organize my comments around three West African proverbs.

The first proverb is "Any water quench fire," which literally translated means that any kind of water will put out a fire. The proverb is however open to many interpretations. In the context of my opening remarks, it serves to remind us of the paramount need to put out the fire, and that whether we like it or not, we may at times have to use Perrier water or champagne. We may not have time to make the ideal choice.

What then have we learned from this week? What insights, lessons and conceptual tools can we take back to our respective institutions? At the least, this Institute has fulfilled one of the crucial functions of education: we have increased our awareness of the dimensions of the problem. Theory has informed practice, and practice has informed theory. The rest of these remarks are an attempt to organize the lessons learned around these categories of insights, lessons, and conceptual tools.

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS

The following are stated as simply as possible, at the risk of oversimplification.

1. There is no such thing as a development institution that does not intervene in disasters.
2. There is no such thing as "the first seventy-two hours" of a disaster. There may be the first seventy-two hours of a crisis event.
3. If you can't learn from people, you can't teach them.
4. The current definition of the word "disaster" as used by many of our institutions, many of our donors, and many of the people in the media, is fundamentally at odds with reality.

There have been clear signs that the lessons of experience are there, for those of us willing and able to listen. The ones that have emerged during the week include:

1. We must not underestimate or undermine a community's or society's capacity to respond to a crisis event. The major factor in coping with a crisis event will always be local intellectual and practical knowledge, combined with inventiveness and energy in finding local solutions.
2. The corollary of the above is that no actor can or should respond to all the needs or provide everything. What we are looking for are methods by which all actors — both insiders and outsiders — can work together.
3. Differing responses must be adapted to needs as they evolve over time. The cardinal principles of response seem to be flexibility, sensitivity, the use of existing structures — perhaps uses that we haven't talked about before — and the identification, location, and distribution of local and imported knowledge.
4. Government must not be written off. Any agency which tries to do this does so not only at its own peril, but at the peril of the people it is trying to help.
5. For this reason, and not withstanding the very real pressures that favor action over procedures and structures, governments must set up structures to mediate the flow of resources arriving from the international community. The international community can attempt to impose discipline and co-ordination on itself, but experience seems to indicate that the local government both has this responsibility and is better able to do this than the international community.
6. Crisis events within the cycle of development and disaster affect dominant and subordinate groups in different and differential ways.
7. In anticipation of crisis events, all parties have a need and a responsibility to increase their options. Experience shows that there are ways of doing this, and awareness-creation, skills-training and formal education are necessary tools, but not sufficient in themselves.

CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

There have emerged during this week important conceptual tools and, in my opinion, this was the most significant contribution of this Institute, given the disparate nature of the group of participants.

We have developed a set of new and exciting definitions:

Development: a process whereby people's vulnerability is reduced.

Disaster: a set of acute events which outstrip a society's capacity to cope with them.

I am less confident in our definitions of "education," but I feel that this may be more a reflection of my own interests and capabilities than of the contributions made in this area.

We have learned that there is a sequence, or a cycle, of needs relative to the process of disaster and development. These are: prevention, mitigation, preparedness, emergency response, relief, recovery, reconstruction, prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and so on.

We have applied tools from the physical sciences. The Mobius strip, now known by us as the Cuny - Beaumont Loop, is the most striking example of theory informing practice, that occurred during the week. What I understood from Don Schramm's addition of a third dimension to the loop is that it enables us to escape from thinking in terms of dichotomies and provides the conceptual tool for us to analyze the flows of a continuum.

We have used the formal education system in a sense as a crucible of the relief-development continuum. Our analysis of the role of the schools during crisis events has enabled us to understand in vivid terms the very real dilemmas of crisis management, and the often unexpected opportunities and roles that schools represent and play.

CONCERNS

These are real and impressive achievements for a short institute. But the issue would not be done justice if we did not consider several areas of concern that either did not emerge during the Institute, or which emerged only to be dropped rather too swiftly for comfort.

This brings up the second West African proverb: "Jampat die, monkey chop pappay." Literally translated this means, "If the situation is worse than death, the monkey will eat hot chilli peppers." The proverb can be used to suggest that if we and the different interests that we represent don't take certain factors into account, we are likely to find ourselves in real trouble.

Discussions in the Institute suffered from the absence of politicians in the group. The issues confronted are intensely political if anything. And I mean political with a small and sometimes unfortunately with a large "p."

This was more diplomatically stated during the week in the form of a question: "If we are not involved in this issue in our own countries, how can we get involved in it in other people's countries?" The kind of perspective suggested by this question is fundamental.

I am not sure that we were comparing like-with-like in much of our discussion. We were comparing disasters in the Third World with emergencies in the First World. And yet, one of the beauties of the definitions we have developed here is the potential they offer to escape from overly economic

and geographic interpretations. Under-development exists in every society. The logic of our argument must push us to consider our own vulnerability which increases with each new nuclear warhead. A consideration of our own viability on a scale commensurate with the one we have considered in the Third World would have contributed to a better understanding of the issue.

Many of the problems in the development-disaster continuum have their origin in the developed nations. Foremost among these are the issues relating to fund-raising techniques, practices for intervention at different points on the development - disaster continuum, and media attitudes towards the Third World and disasters. The Cuny - Beaumont Loop applied here as much as anywhere else.

On a slightly different level, we still have a long way to go on the complex issue of evaluation. We did discuss evaluation as a means of comparing different agency programs and that must be an essential component of our next steps. But a far more challenging and possibly revealing exercise would involve a comparative study of the effectiveness of Western institutional intervention and the effectiveness of coping mechanisms that already exist in the area of a crisis event.

NEXT STEPS

It is not my role to suggest the next steps in the process in which we have been engaged in this Institute. For that, I am rather grateful, for it is probably the most difficult and most important task of any training session. It will determine whether this Institute is to be cost-effective. But I do have a responsibility to suggest a framework for consideration of next steps.

Let us return for a moment to the case study on Kuchaba'l (from Cuny's book, *Disasters and Development*). The most important lesson of that exercise was that development-disaster institutions did engage in a process of preparation before the crisis event. That preparation did not focus on specifics but aimed to establish a small number of guiding principles — negotiated and not imposed: flexible, minimal and pragmatic rather than rigid, maximal and restrictive. The overriding consideration for us, then, as we consider next steps, would seem to be this: If we accept prevention, mitigation and preparedness as the most suitable points for our institutions' entry in the development-disaster continuum, what do we need to do next?

The organizing principles of the next steps have been divided into practice, training, information, and research. This calls up the third West African proverb. It is, "Softly, softly, catchy, monkey." Translated into English, it would probably wind up something like, "More haste, less speed."

The proverb is offered to temper some cautionary remarks. When you think about next steps, unless you want a crisis event — not to speak of a disaster — in your own agency you will have to think about the issues discussed in relation to field work.

Institutions are frustrating. They do not have the luxury or time to develop perfect answers. They are already attempting to carry out enormously complex tasks, that require skills they do not have and may not be able to afford.

Our choice of next steps needs to be guided by the cardinal principles suggested earlier: flexibility, sensitivity, the use of existing structures, and the existence, location and distribution of both internal and external resources.

Some examples from the Institute to illustrate some of the difficulties in proposing next steps:

> The board of directors of my agency will need more persuading than the Cuny - Beaumont strip before it allocated resources to the kinds of things discussed.
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> A goverment or an agency is not in a position to announce that it is incorporating disasters into its development plan. Even if the tiles fall off the roof during an earthquake and kill people it is very dangerous to assume that everyone will conclude that building techniques need to be changed.
>
> Of course we need to evaluate training, but if anyone knows of a methodology that is cheap enough for our agency to afford, s/he should let us know.

The Institute also produced a series of memorable quotations that are worth repeating in the process of thinking about next steps. The ones that stick in my mind include:

> "We know much less than we believe."
>
> "They are O.K. in practice but they don't work out in theory."
>
> "You can ignore it until it happens, but it's not the best way of doing business."

CONCLUSION

In the light of the logic agreed to in the last three days of the Institute, our next steps will not lead to a static, nor even to a comfortable, position. The next steps must be tools that will better equip us to ride the loop. There are more intangibles that we know little about that will be more significant to our ability to ride the loop together than some of the tangibles in which we are experienced. I refer to issues of trust, accountability, liability, humility, and knowing that we don't know.

All too often, I am afraid, two concepts will have to be incorporated into the Cuny - Beaumont Loop. They will be "rock" and "hard place." As we know, the normal outcome of the meeting of these two is that we are damned if we do, and damned if we don't.

The most significant challenge of this workshop is the need to take a holistic approach to disasters and development as symbiotic phenomena in a continuum. The most significant point I could make about this is that the holistic approach to disasters and development is precisely the one that we from dominant groups and institutions do not have, but that most people in the subordinate groups, most vulnerable to crisis events, do have.