

Learnings and Vistas based on revisiting 40 years of the "Global Problematique"

An inquiry and outlook based on the original Prospectus of the Club of Rome on the occasion of 40 years work on the Predicament of Mankind and the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009

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Authorized Transcript of an Internet Interview with



[Alexander Christakis](#)

by [Heiner Benking](#)



Nov 29, 2009: My name is **Heiner Benking**,

I am calling **Dr. Alexander Christakis** in Philadelphia.

I have met Alexander Christakis only one time face-to-face, it was in Crete in 2003 at the International Systems and Social Sciences (ISSS) Conference which focused on Using Systems Thinking to Construct Agoras of the Global Village.

Christakis was at that time President of the ISSS annual conference and had assembled not just the typical researches and practitioners, BUT representatives of indigenous tribes ! - Native American Indians and Maori for example.

I was very impressed by the approach towards other forms of participation and deliberation which Christakis called: "boundary spanning dialogue towards a New Agora" - so we started talking and stayed in touch via e-mail ever since. But here he is, really and virtually with us:

? Dear Alexander Christakis, Aleco, you have been involved with the **Club of Rome since more than 40 years**, worked before with the renowned Architect and Planner Doxiadis, have been with Margaret Mead on the "Delos Island Dialogues", worked on Technology Assessment, ... but only few people from other political or technological domains seem to know you.

How come? - or better maybe let us start with a central and critical day in your life: It is today something like an anniversary, exactly 40 years ago - this late November 2009 - you have met with Aurelio Peccei and Hasan Özbekhan in New York City discussing early steps and first possible reports of the Club of Rome. What was this meeting about and what were the outcomes ?

NOTES:

[ISSS International](#)

[Using Systems Thinking to Construct Agoras of the Global Village, World Futures](#), Taylor & Francis, The Journal of General Evolution, 2003,

[Constantinos A. Doxiadis](#), (Dinos) - [Archives](#), [Ekistics](#), etc

[Margaret Mead](#)

[Delos Islands Dialogues](#)

[Club of Rome](#), - [Aurelio Peccei](#)

[Hasan Özbekhan](#) (Eulogy)

[Commemoration](#) (PDF)

See also Global Agora: [Ken Bausch](#)



Alexander Christakis:

First of all I would like to thank you for the opportunity to talk to you again. I remember your visit to Crete, to our conference and our interactions, and I have wonderful memories of our getting together. The Club of Rome experience 40 years ago remains a milestone period in my life because it was the first time I met Aurelio. I had met Hassan and worked with Hassan during my Doxiadis years, and of course Hassan was a member of the Delos Symposia which were organised by Dinos Doxiadis who was a very visionary architect. So this was my relation with Hasan who was at that time the director of planning of a very forward looking information technology company which was called "Systems Development Corporation". Hasan was fluent in Italian, so he was very friendly with Aurelio. Aurelio had written the book *The Chasm Ahead* and he was going around the world talking to leaders about the technology gap, that was escalating between the advanced countries and the less developed countries of the world. Aurelio was clearly a philanthropist and humanist, he wanted to do something about this "Chasm" Gap - so in the discussion with Hasan they idealized, they did the first conceptual understanding, conceptualization of the Club of Rome, they were talking about this in the first report called the "Predicament of Mankind".

The meeting was primarily oriented towards taking the concept and trying to make a project out of it. implement it, because Aurelio by that time had realized by travelling around the world and talking to political leaders, industrial leaders, and others, he not have an impact, so we agreed to initiate a project. Hasan was going to be the director of the Club's project, I was to be his deputy and we settled for a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary team about 12-15 people. It was to be located in Geneva at the Battelle Memorial Institute Laboratory. The location was clearly an attempt to have it in a neutral territory so to have neutrality in term of national boundaries - and the project was going to be very visionary and after the discussions we agreed to launch the project for about a year and my first assignment as the deputy to Hasan was to travel around the world, and find people and invite them to become a members of the Club of Rome. The criterion for selecting them we started talking about was the diversity of perspectives.

So I started travelling to different countries, meeting with people and inviting them, Hasan did also a lot of that. So this is what happened 40 years ago in New York.

? We only know about LIMITS TO GROWTH from 1972 and I heard when I was a student about the Methodenstreit. Aleco you call the difference between the two positions, the difference between an engineering blueprint and an architectural design. This applied to social system design.

Systems
Development
Corporation, [SDC](#)

[The Chasm Ahead](#), Erich Jantsch

[The Predicament of Mankind - Quest for Structured Responses to Growing World-wide - Complexities and Uncertainties - A PROPOSAL](#) The Club of Rome, 1970 (PDF)

[Battelle Memorial Institute Laboratory](#)

[Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential](#), since 1972 (now Actions, Options, Strategies (3rd Volume) See history: [Judge, Wellesley-Wesley, Jungk, Saur](#) Strongly influenced by E. Jantsch, H. Özbekhan

[Limits to Growth](#), [Donella H. Meadows](#), [Dennis L. Meadows](#), [Jørgen Randers](#), [William W. Behrens III](#), The Club of Rome, 1972



Alexander Christakis:

What happened is that the proposal that I mentioned: The Predicament of Mankind was very advanced conceptually and was as you mentioned an architectural design, as compared to an engineering blueprint, which has more specificity or details. At the time the proposal was reviewed by all kinds of different disciplines and some of the systems thinker, I remember for example one of the famous 21st century systems thinker West Churchman thought that the proposal was absolutely brilliant, he could appreciate the architecture. People like systems engineers at that time were much more involved with what you might call a systems engineering approach, were very critical of the proposal. What happened was that we went to MIT, a member of the Executive Committee was Eduardo Pestel who was a systems engineer himself. He was very prominent in Germany and he was also at that time the chairman of the Volkswagen Foundation. So Pestel was very fascinated by the System Dynamics Model that was promoted by a mathematical statistics and modeling professor, Jay Forrester. So Pestel was persuasive and was able to convince other members of the Executive Committee of the Club that the Limits to Growth approach was the right way to go; however that was a compromise to the vision and the architecture of the Predicament of Mankind proposal which was primarily oriented towards dialogue and stakeholder engagement. That was the fundamental principle in that proposal and it was trying to make sure that the diversity of viewpoints of the stakeholders and their voices to be integrated into what you might call a systemic approach versus the systems analysis approach of the Limits to Growth. So we are talking here about systemic thinking which is really the Predicament of Mankind proposal.

? I once called it humorously the "Methodenstreit" the "CLASH of 1970" ? - So what happened and how did you continue?



Alexander Christakis:

We thought that compromising the principles of the original proposal was not appropriate and Hasan and I left - right there. We left and resigned from the Executive Committee. Hasan went to worked for the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Russell Ackoff was running there a very interesting program called the Social Systems Sciences, called the "S Cube", and I joined the Battelle Memorial Institute and we started something called The Academy for Contemporary Problems, because the Battelle people decided not to commit any resources to the Club of Rome any longer. In other words the decision was not to allocate significant resources to the Limits to Growth model and the report.

? Our common friend Walter Bogan, who was preparing for 1972 Stockholm and 1992 Rio looking into Civil Society and wider dimensions ... told me you were looking into and doing also

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Churchman's
Systems
Approach Series:**

[C. West
Churchman's
Legacy and
Related Works ,
Springer 2006](#)

[Jay Forrester
System Dynamics](#)

[Eduard Pestel](#)

More on the:
[Reception of the
Limits to growth
report \(GERMAN
- PDF\)](#)

[Lexikon
Nachhaltigkeit](#)

and the
[Volkswagen
Foundation -
Stiftung \(40 years
- German\)](#)

[Russell Ackoff: S
Cube](#) - for more
see also:

[International
Encyclopedia of
Systems and
Cybernetics](#) and
[IFSR](#)

[Academy for
Contemporary
Problems](#)

s.a: [Technology
Assessment](#)
(OTA) etc. and
[Social indicators in
perspective](#)

Stockholm 1972 /
Rio 1992: [Walter](#)

normative and participatory future studies, doing just models and scenarios, which he called prognostic futures are in this view needed, but not sufficient, not enough. Would you also think that these three "future studies" have to be brought together, so we do more than just modeling?



Alexander Christakis:

Yes, that is one of the difficulties with the "Limits to Growth". It was not necessarily a bad effort, because it was modeling in the early systems methodology, but it is projecting the future, and it is what we call extrapolating or forecasting, as opposed to normative, or futures creating approach that has been advocated by Hasan Özbekhan and others, like Erich Jantsch was then an advocate of creating the future versus extrapolating the present. The difficulty with the extrapolation of the present is that you perpetuate the current situation. But trying to change it when you start with the database of the present and you project it and you make maybe minor changes, and you cannot really close a gap, like the "Chasm Ahead" Aurelio was talking about by extrapolating. You have to do the futures-creating, normative approach for planning. You create a vision and then plan to work backwards - you have to approximate the achievement of that vision. The vision actually if properly conceptualized acts as a magnet to change our current situation and approach a vision that we collectively generate. Now, the thing about Futures Creating is that one of the necessary components is dialogue, the engagement of the voices of the stakeholders. Because without that engagement, it becomes an exercise in futility. And that is why dialogue became for me a voyage - a science of dialogue in its own right became a necessary ingredient for the accomplishment of a normative and futures creating approach.

? You see, two weeks ago we have been meeting here in the town-hall with the Nobel Peace Laureates, remembering 20 years ago the Berlin wall coming down, and the main concern in the Environment and Policy Session was - when I thought about you all the time - was that after Copenhagen (we are about to go there for two weeks) people fear that they have to address the issue of the Climate Crisis, because since 1972 or 1992 we know all this, but we are not making progress, even to opposite is the case. So on the main panel, with the representative of Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, we learned that we need a New Science, all this struggles all this prognosis has not really showing and providing us with confidence and valid pragmatic ways to proceed and how the people can understand and come to action.

My question, what could have been done since 1970 differently when this prospective and iterative forward and backward design process, this normative and participative futures would be combined ? Or don't you think there has to be a review of possible New Science and New Thinking to really bring the sciences, also social system design sciences together. So what do you think what you were doing at least the last 40 years- is this New Science or Old Science ?

[J. Bogan](#)

[The Chasms Ahead](#)

See: Aurelio Peccei, Club of Rome, [Review Erich Jantsch](#)

[Erich Jantsch](#)

[The Chasms Ahead](#)

See: Aurelio Peccei, Club of Rome, [Review Erich Jantsch](#)

[Erich Jantsch](#)

[Futures Creation \(Özbekhan\)](#)

Interview [Peace Nobel Conference](#), Berlin, November 2009, [s.a.](#)

[Ian Dunlop, Need for Crisis Summit](#)

[Climate Crisis, Hand-out to bold delegates, CSD 15, 2005, UNFCCC, 2009](#)

UNFCCC, Copenhagen 2009, side-event [I II](#)

New Renaissance ([PDF -large](#))

[New Embodied Covenant needed](#)



Alexander Christakis:

Right, I think you know we have been working on something in common, you and I have been working on. Something very similar, of course we have a little bit of difference, but fundamentally we recognize that if the stakeholders do not own the problem, they do not own the solution. Let me explain what I mean by that: If you want people to be mobilized and change their behaviour you have to make sure that they understand that they own the definition of the problem. Even last night when for example President Obama was talking about Afghanistan or the regional problem of Afghanistan and Pakistan. What he did in his talk was he made an effort, he started to explicate the problem, of course from his point of view. By doing that he was trying to essentially say this is not my problem, this is a world problem. We own that problem. Now ideally, the ownership of that problem can become more vital if the participants, the stakeholders are engaged in authentic dialog, so that they will say, aha - this is our problem, this is not Heiner's problem, and it is not Aleco's problem, we are all in this together, and because we own it together, we going to work towards solving this problem together.

So what I have been doing with colleagues is develop a science of dialogue, the discipline of structured dialogue. And as everybody is talking about dialogue and everybody is talking about talking, but the kind of talking that is taking place including all of this very interesting international conferences does not mean that it gets to the root causes of the Problematique, of the mess, of the Global Mess. So unfortunately even with the best intentions you get all the very important people together, and they remain with the best intentions either superficial, or they are not able to be persuasive to the stakeholders about the criticality of the intensity of the mess, such as the global warming. The global warming is one component of the Problematique. What I mean by that is another thing about the Club of Rome. It was realized from the outset that we are talking about the problematique or a mess, that is the manifestation of a set of problems strongly connected. The connections are important!

When we disconnect them, then we deal with a component of the Problematique. Without the context of the whole Problematique, we actually if you like, compromise the criticality of the problem. So what I am saying is, that we have to help the stakeholders understand all the problems by engaging them in authentic dialogue, and we also need to recognize that those problems are not compartmentalized, they are actually part of the global mess, and the connections are to be taken seriously - and incidentally, I am just writing another book that has been now published called *The Talking Point*. The Talking Point talks about the connections, and how important they are.

People in the United States are talking about connecting the dots. However, it is not easy to connect the dots, especially in a group setting, to get stakeholders and invite them to collectively, in a participatory way to establish the connections of the problems, and discover the root causes. So that is what I have been doing for 40

[Obamavision - ANTICIPATING THE CHALLENGES TO THE VISION OF A BOTTOM-UP DEMOCRACY](#)

[The Talking Point: Creating an Environment for Exploring Complex Meaning.](#)

[Thomas R. Flanagan Alexander N. Christakis, 2010](#)

[Cyprus peace making: \(WIKIPEDIA\)](#)

[Futures World Center](#)

<http://www.cnti.org.cy/>

<http://www.futureworldscenter.org/>

<http://81.21.43.186/eucitizenship/index.php/>

years now and we call this a science, a structured dialogue science, and it is available in about 500 publications, about 10 books, and it is practiced now in Cyprus. We have very good progress in Cyprus and in other parts of the world. In Cyprus we have worked now on the reunification of that island, because the Island is divided into a Turkish Cypriot North and a Greek Cypriot South. And my colleagues there are working very successfully to break down that wall. You talked about the Berlin wall, we are talking here about breaking down the wall that divides Cyprus to a north and a south.

? I was very much impressed when I saw the first parts of the book: "How People Harness their Collective Wisdom in Co-Laboratories of Democracy" and so you think your deliberation and your dialogue method is something for peace-making?

I remember a leader from the Comanche nation representing North American tribes, that was been using your approach in peace negotiations between tribes, so the issue seems to not only about fighting between two parties, you and me, but between many parties and us. So your deliberation method is good for multi-stakeholder peace making?



Alexander Christakis:

Well, LaDonna Harris is her name, La Donna Harris is very distinguished Native American from the Comanche tribe, and she has been working for the last 35 years for Americans for Indian Opportunities (AIO). La Donna was a visionary because when we met 20 years, she wanted to adopt the structured dialogue approach for the native American tribes.

The tribes, as you know have had very many problems in terms of survival and sustainability, and LaDonna recognized that the consensus building approach that I was using and the structured dialogue methodology was very similar to the traditional way of Native Americans of coming together and building consensus and making decisions on the basis of consensus. So she thought that our approach was the equivalent of the traditional way of decision making. We trained them to do that, they are doing that again and again all-over the world. And LaDonna came to Crete at the Conference you mentioned in 2003, a unique experience. Her style of interacting, a way of participating, a way of actually engaging other people in a very, very consensus building orientation.

? This seems to be very close to what Obama has in mind. I was taking part some times in your efforts towards the "Obamavision" - helping to realize and put on track or contribute to the vision of Obama for bottom-up democracy.

[Harness Collective Wisdom - Co-Laboratories of Democracy](#) K. Bausch, A. Christakis

Discover root causes; Adopt consensual action plans; Develop teams dedicated to implementing those plans; and Generate lasting bonds of respect, trust, and cooperation.

[Americans for Indian Opportunities AIO](#)

[MUSE-AIQ American Indian Quarterly](#) 2001

[Dialogue LaDonna Harris – Alexander Christakis](#) page 2-5

s.a.: Advancement of Maori Opportunity (AMO) virtual Indigenous Leaders Interactive System (ILIS)

[Obamavision](#) – Anticipating the challenges to the vision of bottom-up democracy



Alexander Christakis:

Yes, that is something right to do, to do a bottom-up democracy because we think that actually all democracy is local, ultimately in other words, we have to go to the local community level and engage stakeholders for their situation. We have to recognize, in other words, that there are data that are observer-dependent, meaning that the human beings know about the situation. If we can engage them into meaningful, authentic dialog, and gather that data. This data is superior to other data that are being gathered to be useful for statistical analysis, that is fine we can have those too for different purposes. So when we for example talk about children dropping out of school, which is a very serious problem, for example in my city Philadelphia, one out of two children drop out of school. Alright, so that is a serious problem because it has implications for the future of the city. You know to address that problem, we have to listen to the voice of the children that are dropping out of school. Their voices represent what I call observer-dependent data. They are relevant to their situation. Nobody knows what this children have to say about their situation until we engage them into authentic dialogue, and we ask them: "Why are you dropping out of school?". We did that, we have done it, we have videotapes about, if you want to see them you can go to the CWA website. There is a video-tape out there that shows the authentic voice of the children generating data that are for their perspective. So that is very important and Obama should realize the distinction between observer dependent data, which are the voices of the stakeholders and observer-independent data that are gathered for statistical purposes.

COMPLEX
PROBLEM:
[Children dropping out of School](#)

[Drop out rate in Ewart](#)

[Everett Students Video](#)

s.a.: [SDD School](#)

[CWA](#)

<http://cwaltd.wetpa.int.com/page/Resources>

? I was looking now into what a Climate Summit and a Crisis Summit could all be about, how that could be brought together, and then I remember that you did with Hasan Özbekhan this retrospective inquiry to not only revisit the Original Prospectus of the Club of Rome 30 years later, but really see how we can tackle the gigantic problems we are facing, so my question is: "Will you do it again after 40 years? - is there anything New?, and if you can think about, maybe like the Obamavision, could this also contribute to a possible Crisis Summit, and in the original intentions of Stockholm 1972 and Rio 1992, the issues are brought together and not separated in piece-meal splintering function, are separated into disciplines, sectors, levels, ... and not brought together to really come to life, valid, and lasting answers to the problems we face!

After 30 years: [A retrospective inquiry](#), revisiting the Original Prospectus of the Club of Rome and explaining the SDP (Structured Design Science (SDS) method.



Alexander Christakis:

Well that is an incredible question, because I have been struggling with that. One way of course is when we did the bottom-up democracy project for the Obamavision project you participated in, we selected a team, sort of a multi-national, multi-disciplinary team of about 50 people, distributed all over the world, and we tried to identify barriers to the vision of bottom-up democracy We could do

ObamaVision see above

something similar with different nationalities, different perspectives, we could do it virtually, specially with your help and the technology that exists. If we do it face-to-face has many advantages, what it requires is the commitment of time, dedicated time. We have discovered that this commitment of time, unfortunately for disciplined structured dialogue, is not something that happened very easily. Because we are immersed in a culture of "lets have a talk", "lets hear the gurus", sort of the wise men, what we should see for this kind of situations is only the collective wisdom that counts.

Not the individual wisdom, well it is not like theoretical physics, Einstein conceptualizing the general theory of relativity, his brilliance that kind of brilliance is irrelevant when we talk about the "Problematique". The Problematique as I have said before has to be co-discovered and co-owned.

So to come back to your question: Yes we can do something similar to engaging stakeholders from different disciplines, different nationalities, virtually and also face-to-face, with different personalities, but more important than the resources is the commitment of the stakeholders to engage in a disciplined dialogue with humility and authenticity and the willingness to learn from each other.

The science of dialogue we have developed works, is applied all over the world with people from all walks of life, except when we are confronted with arrogance and elitism. What I am saying to you is that arrogance and elitism are not ingredients that can solve the global mess. Humility is the way to go about it and constructive authentic dialog.

? In summing up I remember a statement from Margeaux who said in Open Vistas something like: Statements and values are meaningless if they are not seen in context, so it is only relevant when it becomes clear **when** it was said, and **who** said it in **which** context, and who was the me, and the you, and the others, so you think in your deliberative process we can overcome that predicament, or do at least one step further overcoming this incredible challenge of Babel and confusion, and if I sum it up like this, I think it makes much sense for me to see the value of someone doing something for himself or doing something for others and shares and acres and dares. So all in a nutshell, I will in two weeks present our little conversation here to some friends in Copenhagen at the Climate Summit and I hope we have further meetings maybe for peace in Israel or wherever, that people come together beyond the need to agree, but learning and questioning, and deliberating, - so I think our little conversation here was a sign of hope - Thank you !

[Positions and Identities in Global Contexts:](#)
[Awareness of Self and Others](#)

[Requisite Requirements - AXIOMS](#)



Alexander Christakis: Thank you very much Heiner. God bless and the best wishes for you in Copenhagen and everywhere you go. You are a wonderful man, and I admire you for your dedication and your commitment and I am honoured to be your friend, thank you.

Heiner: Good morning to Philadelphia, and good luck with your work for the next 40 years !

Please note: We propose above to visit this [hyperlink version](#) with notes and references for more convenient reading and studies. It became obvious that some of the people mentioned, like Mead, Peccei, Christakis, Özbekhan, Forrester, Bogan, ... are not known by our readers, and this is quite the same with Institutions like Battelle, CWA, Volkswagen Foundation. Jumping to hyperlinks and footnotes or references distracts the easy flow of reading, and so we thought that beside the audio and video version of this interview, a tabular form is most convenient to get the necessary background on the first and second go reading the deep answers of Aleco.

To get started maybe visit these pages in the internet: <http://21stcenturyagora.org/> http://benking.de/open-forum/OF_Backgroundpapers/ I strongly recommend also: <http://designdialogues.com/> - <http://redesignresearch.com/> - and <http://socodesign.wetpaint.com/> and the NCCD <http://www.thataway.org/> to get deeper into the matter.

Heiner Benking, November – December 2009

You find a mirror / copy of this document at <http://21stCenturyAgora.org>

FINAL NOTE: THIS WORK IS IN PROGRESS, but was done in a rush for the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in Dec 2009 - please come back ! / we have to include the official announcement at the [SUVIVAL ACADEMY](#) and [CopenVegan](#) / Veg Climate Alliance Initiative at the UNFCCC [COP15](#) negotiations and the [Klimaforum 09](#), the Peoples Climate Summit on the occasion of this event *[Programme](#) Sunday Dec. 13, 2009

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