The next step in Auroville’s development?
The Integrated Sustainability Platform (ISP) is an attempt to help Auroville better utilise its existing resources through collaborative planning. Alon and Batel have designed and facilitated the process which, so far, has involved over 120 Aurovilians.

Auroville Today: What is the philosophy that underlies ISP?

Alon: It comes from ecological philosophy, systems thinking and complexity sciences. This deal with how a system can organize itself from the bottom upwards, which is the way that most living systems actually function. Another important aspect is inherent flexibility, which means that a system can continually change and adapt itself to changing circumstances. So we are applying ecological methods to human orga- nizations to see how a place like Auroville can organize itself in such a way that no central orga- nization sets the rules. Instead, the system builds itself up organically.

Batel: Compared to a natural system, human societies are much more complex. For one thing, human beings can make conscious choices. The ISP approach is to learn from nature but to rethink how to make it happen using the existing resources available: this is analogous to ecological systems which always seem to be efficient and adaptable. And to do this one needs to take into consideration many more layers and perspectives than one thinks about now and then see how you can work with them.

Has this been done before?

Alon: This is the first time that we are fully implementing this approach. We wanted to do it in Auroville because we see many similarities between the planning philosophy and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. We think this approach can be implemented anywhere, but when a system is different it requires research to discover how the nature of the system is being dealt with.

What happened in this phase?

Batel: The process started for us with three months of research. We met over 200 people and read a lot of back issues of Auroville Today and anything else we could find about the actual day-to-day life in Auroville. This helped us divide Auroville into eighteen sectors under the three main divisions of social, natural and physical infrastructures. This research phase eventually led to the formation of planning teams for each sector. We tried to find people who represent different viewpoints in each sector so we could get deep and interesting discussions on the basis of questions we asked them.

What was the purpose of the questions?

Batel: We were asking them how their sector functions: what the main projects and units in their sector are, the relationship between them, what is working, what is not working and what can be improved. Alon was important for us to identify the main values and purpose of each sector. The questions were designed in such a way as to lead naturally to a five year development strategy for each sector.

How many people were involved?

Alon: About one hundred in the sector teams but some sectors, like village outreach, food and farms and forests, decided to work with everyone in their sector. So, overall, more than 120 people answered the questions. Almost half the sectors were new. In other words, many of the groups we formed had not sat together before even though they had been working in the same field. The groups met once a week for four months.

Are you happy with the outcome?

Alon: All of them came up with what was needed to happen next in their sector, so for me this is 100% success.

Batel: ISP brought a lot of new energy to different sectors. For example, many people in the education sector had thought they couldn’t do things because they didn’t have the money. But then they realized the problem is not the money, the problem is they are not collaborating and could do a lot if they collaborated more.

Finally there was a one day workshop held in person with about ten people and with four other people from four other groups, which meant that altogether each group met all the other seventeen groups. As a result of these interactions, most of the groups’ strategies were modified. This was the last step of phase one, where the process begins to see itself as a part of the bigger whole and adjusts its approach.

Alon: Actually, this was one of the biggest learnings. All the groups realized there wasn’t much connectivity and interaction between them if Auroville is to progress.

What will happen in the second phase of the ISP?

Batel: There are two main tasks. One is to establish the feedback process between the sec- tors and the main planning body, the second is to take responsibility for the implementation of the strategies they came up with (see box). This requires some people in each sector to give up part of themselves full-time to this work.

Each sector requires additional human resources to do this. Specifically, forty additional maintenances are being requested. If the funding for these is not available, will the pro- ject stop?

Alon: No. If we can’t find the money initially – and we will look outside Auroville if the community is not ready to provide it – we will use volunteers to do the work. However, it won’t be the same and progress will be slower. That’s the advantage of this approach over a project initiated by the existing foundations.

So connectivity, communication, between the sectors is the key?

Alon: Yes: it is a crucial part of the process. The overall communication function will be taken up by the communications sector, which has to be a transparent communication tool. At the same time, as people get information about what is happening in other sectors, they have to stop thinking that something happened ‘over there’ and start feeling that something happened ‘here’; that we’re all part of the same thing.

Isn’t there still a danger of abuse? That, for example, one sector will try to go its own way without considering the needs of the whole?

Alon: Let’s take an example. The energy sector, for example, gets a lot of money for a particular project and decided to go ahead without consulting other involved, it is up to the communication sector to inform all the other sectors about what is happening so that some remedial action can be taken. For if one sector goes its own way like this, if it tries to become too strong at the expense of others, it will make for a sick society and everybody will suffer.

Alon: But if, for each financial year, the turnover of all sectors can be presented, and if one sector is way over the others, there should be an inclusive decision on how this sector can support other sectors. If, on the other hand, one sector is developing very slowly, the other sec- tors can assist.

Batel: We see this process as a tool that fos- ters collective responsibility. The aim is always to strive towards balance among the sectors.

What will this new organization look like?

Alon: The idea is not to create a top-down management structure but the opposite: the decision-makers will be the people from the sec- tors. There will still be a role for a body like L’Avenir d’Auroville but it will be a facilitating role. In fact, we are in discussions with L’Avenir at present concerning recognizing each of the 18 sectors as decision-making bodies.

Auroville at present has many examples of ‘top-down’ management. How can you be sure that the ISP will not go the same way?

Alon: Top-down management tends to depress peoples’ motivation and the energy for growth, so it is crucial to look for ways to go this way. The more the sectors work with each other, the less need there is for some kind of top- down or outside management. It also means a lot on how the sectors will manage themselves internally. If the sectors’ coordinators understand all the viewpoints from within their sector, then it will work.

But if the sector’s coordinators become man-agers and people from within from the sector feel excluded from the process, then the sector will not serve its purpose and this will require other sectors’ involvement.

So connectivity, communication, between the sectors is the key.

Excerpts from the sectors’ five years development plans

- Mobility: establish a mobility steering group; among other things, fund-raise and allocate funds for a Green Grid; create service nodes for parking, cycling and storage
- Water: establish an Auroville Water Board with authority to implement water policies
- Energy: establish an Energy Board to set up an energy fund and a sustainable energy educational programme
- Waste: develop educational pro- grammes for schools and the general public; implement new waste manage- ment guidelines for new housing projects
- Architecture and planning: formulate a green building and infrastructure policy; create user-friendly Master Plan; establish guidelines; create Board of Architects
- Education: develop teacher-training programme based on integral education, ecological expertise and progressive Indian educational programmes
- Economy: establish Friends of Auroville commercial status; explore how to part- ner with external companies; develop transparent criteria for investments and funds
- Culture: develop a financial support strategy for arts in Auroville
- Communication: improve collaboration between the various media, develop com- munication infrastructure project
- Villages: expand cultural exchanges between Auroville and the villages; develop a village development plan; coordinate existing alternative energy products; coordination body to mediate between working groups and the villages
- Forestry: create larger managed forest areas; accept grants and additions to Master Plan as carbon sinks; appoint for- estry coordinator to communicate and fundraise
- Farms: offer certification for organic food; promote training of village farmers; promote urban farming in city area
- Housing: expand fundraising; create housing assets management policy
- Post: open more distribution centres; expand relationships with the bioregion
- Health: set up a Health Board to coordi- nate the health sector and develop health education programmes
- Tourism: develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy; develop a sustainable tourism strategy
- Finance: establish financial guidelines for emerging enterprises; development of new financial products

The main criticism of the ISP approach is that it is impractical. For example, there have been attempts in the past to get different groups to work together but most of them have failed because some people want to keep control over their own project. Why should it be differ- ent this time?

Alon: I believe that people, like anything else in nature, first need to take care of them- selves. But then they reach a point where they understand that they need to work with others because then they will develop faster and better. I think Auroville has reached this stage. But it is not only about collaboration also about the quality of development. You can learn a lot from collaborations in ways which cannot be antic- ipated in advance.

Batel: Through our process, we understood that development in Auroville will occur by investment in its sectors. The more the sectors develop, the more Auroville will be able to manage.

At the beginning of this process there were people who told us it would not work and that it was not doable. Now, as a result of the ISP, one of the biggest successes has created a huge project involving collaboration between different sectors. Many other groups are lurching like this. So I think the reality is that many Aurovilians have been waiting for something like this and now there are fears and concerns about the next step, but the wish to try something different is even stronger.

From an interview by Alon

Auroville Today September 2010