



by Joe Claey's

PLAN

A SIMULATED REALITY

Here we have an article presenting an in-depth reflection about how a simulation exercise can stimulate people's minds. Do not expect a detailed description about how "Plan B" should be run, but you will get a vivid picture of the concept and some of the controversial issues lived in the simulation. You are encouraged to share your reflections with the author!

I am not a scientist, a psychologist or a sociologist, I am a trainer. I develop games and exercises on social issues (social exclusion, origin of conflict and war, active citizenship etc...). The following text is based on observations and feedback from participating groups and includes my personal understanding of what has happened in trying out PLAN B.

I am aware that some of you might react to several of the harsh statements that appear, I encourage and welcome this. In contrast to the simulation exercise on social exclusion ("Social in EXclusion"), Plan B is "protected". While "Social in EXclusion" can be downloaded freely from the toolbox of the SALTO site (www.salto-youth.net), PLAN B is an exclusive exercise. Because of the rather astonishing results of PLAN B, this article is dedicated to the outcome rather than to the running and details of the structure of this simulation exercise.

It happens often ... people sitting in a bar (or anywhere else), listening to others around them commenting on decisions taken by politicians. Looking at the screen above the counter, people are seen signalling approval or disapproval with what they see and hear. As the evening progresses discussions often become heated, people become more animated and make statements about what they would do if they were a politician and how they would do things differently. This is the catalyst for PLAN B, if you "talk the talk", lets "walk the walk".

Plan B has quite a history so far. When Youth Express Network invited me in 1999 to be part of the trainers' team for a training course on "Youth policy", I was quite excited. Not knowing yet how to approach this topic, I had plenty to think about. Training can be organized using many different strategies and many different methods and approaches. When I realized that for me an essential part of talking about

"policy making" was to live the experience, it was clear we needed to get into the shoes of the politicians themselves. Plan B slowly became a reality with participants relying on their own beliefs and convictions for the exercise.

A simulation exercise seemed the most appropriate method. Now, after 5 years of trials, updating and adapting PLAN B, the course and the results of the exercise have become very predictable. I discovered that PLAN B had become a powerful tool for working on "active citizenship" with youngsters and adults. This process has produced the following results.

Informative games

As the title already reveals, an informative game is basically an exercise which focuses on passing on information, using techniques based mainly on board-games. This information can be related to clear knowledge on a subject, or knowledge of feelings, emotions and attitudes (your own and those of others). My experience shows that youngsters and adults retain and have a better understanding of information gained through this type of activity which in turn aids analysis. The main advantage of PLAN B is however that the feelings and actions are authentic and real. Everything happens in simulated reality and therefore has only personal consequences in accordance with the facilitation process in the debriefing and the individuals' capacity to learn.

Most informative games (actually, the name "exercise" would be more appropriate) can therefore also only be played one time. Once the information has been passed on, the exercise in itself is no longer of any real use. It is nevertheless possible to play these games a second time, taking into consideration that people know what will happen and why, and therefore your exercise acquires a different aim and purpose. I have always - except on two occasions - used PLAN B with "first time-groups".



EXERCISE?



Action during a TC on Crossborder co-operation in EYCB

What is ...Plan B?

The aim of this exercise is to expose and explore interactions/attitudes between other groups which have received the same challenge. To explore one's own behaviour in decision-making and the consequences of these actions in the simulated society.

The different steps in this exercise are:

1. Discussion in small groups (3) on the definition of democracy and citizenship.
2. Feedback from the groups through plenary discussions.
3. Individual work on the values one expects from a politician.
4. Group work on desired values. Each of the three groups also creates a flag, a name and an imaginary hero for their group.
5. Presentations of the different work. At the beginning of the exercise the three groups are told that we are one country and each group (=region) receives instructions, rules, population and money.
6. For 1 hour, the groups are confronted with different situations such as refugees and the creation of different commissions to oversee the construction of roads and houses for their population. If this is not done within a set timeframe, people will die.
7. Debriefing (+ link to reality)

The players are confronted with the complexity of a society. The participants try to create their own dream-society and while playing, discover how difficult this is. Different sub themes that are linked:

- The role of the politician in society
- Active citizenship
- The refugee issue
- Civilisation versus nature
- Mutual understanding and cooperation

Outcome concerning some of the different issues tackled:

► Corruption as a spontaneous result

At the beginning, two groups are given an extra envelope containing more money. They are told that the other groups are not aware of their better financial position. It is for them to decide whether they keep this a secret, use the money, or inform the others of their good fortune.

To date none of the groups have revealed this at the beginning of the exercise, in sharp contrast with the “desired values” they defined 15 minutes earlier. They have instilled mistrust in themselves, and revealed an ability to be corrupt in their dealings with others. Once this takes place, it is very hard for the groups to undo. At a later stage in the exercise, several participants have tried, but when revealing their money (and corruption), they incur the consequences, ie disbelief and mistrust.

The different groups become “business” orientated. Initially there is only co-operation if it clearly benefits their strategy.

► “Regionalisation” and national identity

I have been confronted with a clear tendency towards the former but not the latter. Once the three subcultures are created in the exercise, most participants lost the common feeling of belonging to the same unit. The different groups –almost automatically- see the others as opponents rather than ‘comrades’. The groups tend to do a better job alone instead of reaching a common “best solution”. Individual pride and a desire for recognition becomes an important part of their subculture rules.

Towards the end of the exercise there are often attempts, through a process of co-operation, to embark on joint decision making. However, due to the initially installed “hidden corruption” and time-stress factor, most attempts fade away in the chaos and the initiative-takers are left with three choices: join the chaos of individualism, continue to try establishing joint decision-making or simply stopping their active involvement in PLAN B (in real terms: becoming merely a member of society instead of an active citizen).



► Communication: too much or too little

Talking, listening, comparing, discussing, negotiating... all of this happens from the very beginning till the last minute. There is a continuous hubbub of voices and eventually, the overdose of voices and opinions results in a lack of constructive communication. In the heat of the exercise, enforced by the time pressure and intensified by the installed corruption, the groups become alienated from each other. And this distance does not only occur between the different groups, but also within each of the groups.

Some participants get nervous in their attempt to keep track of all the decisions and opinions whilst trying to keep a democratic process in their group. As facilitator I only encourage this process. I play fast rhythm music in the background (sometimes even military marches). On a few occasions participants have interfered to shut down the music, but most of the time participants don't even notice it and express surprise when it is pointed out to them.

When the groups seem to have found their stability and it seems they all are about to reach a certain level of cooperation, a "Commission of Representatives" is created. Each region is invited to send 1 or 2 members to this Commission. This small group receives a package of 9 important facilities, which include a school, a hospital, a supermarket and an old nuclear power plant. They have 45 minutes to place all these on the map. If one of the buildings does not get placed, all groups face a financial penalty. The Commission meets in a separate room, not accessible to the other players.

I've experienced 2 main common points over all the trials. First, the old nuclear power plant (if not refused) is always placed in a remote corner of the country. Secondly, the creation of this Commission creates a new dimension in the exercise. Where the Commission starts working together, the groups around the map return to their initial behaviour of separate work. Moreover, the physical distance and the lack of communication between the members of the Commission and their initial groups, divides the groups internally. Often the members of the Commission are regarded as "not-to-be-trusted-anymore" and find themselves on an in-between level.

Information, agreements and decisions start contradicting each other and the lack of organised communication gives rise to conflict.

► The Council of Wise People

Once the groups have created their own culture, it is announced that a special Council will be created. Two regions can send a member to this Council. This council will work in the interests of all, provide advice on conflict issues and keep an eye on the environmental aspects of the country (eg. protection of valuable natural areas). It is basically the only body that works on a neutral and global level. As it has no real power in decision-making but can only offer advice, it is often ignored by the three groups. It is considered a waste of valuable time, as it has nothing to offer in concrete terms. The only way this Council manages to exercise its influence in decision-making is by concealing its lack of power from the groups. Once the groups realise this, it becomes a mere "gadget".

The Council is the only group that is manipulated under PLAN B. The Wise Men are told to be neutral and honest, except for one of them. He/she is clearly instructed always to favour his/her own region. During the debriefing it takes time to explain to the other players that the role he/she had was not an authentic one.

► The victim group

One of the regions is systematically victimised, from the very beginning till the end. Except for the group itself, no one else really seems to care about its situation. Some players don't expect differences between the groups, others don't pay attention and yet others simply don't care: "bad luck". When a group does support this 'victim group' by donating money or natural resources, it is done in a paternalist spirit with a World Bank attitude.

This region faces a large number of disadvantages:

- A territory with very few natural resources.
- Very little money to start with given the size of its population.
- No extra envelope with money.
- Only 1 representative on the Commission of Representatives while the other groups can send 2 representatives.
- More refugees but less money.
- Longest distance to the factory.
- They can not send a representative to the Council of Wise People.

Solidarity is a beautiful concept but hard to initiate and put into practice, even in Plan B which is just a game...

► The refugee issue

Groups of refugees arrive in the different regions. Each has different circumstances and finances. If these groups are not accommodated, they die.

Next interesting observations:

- In 50% of the cases, refugees die during the simulation exercise. These sudden deaths have always sent a shockwave through the whole group and the ensuing protests have changed the rest of the course of the exercise.
- Most groups prefer to keep their natural resources (trees and animals) instead of exchanging them to improve infrastructure or take in refugees. It makes us think about the value of a human life. Is reality any different...?
- Some groups opt for a regional distribution of the refugees while others (sometimes with clear purpose) set up huge ghetto-like camps.
- Once this exercise was used on a training course for youth workers from different corners of the world. And surprisingly, a group of refugees was rejected very categorically by a youth worker from Central Africa: "We (at home) have them, I know what I'm talking about. We (in the exercise) reject them." It made us all wonder if accepting refugees without question or hesitation is a luxury of the rich North, which has never had to deal with large waves of refugees...?

▶ PLAN B as a game versus an exercise

In Plan B, as in many simulation exercises, some participants play the exercise as a game, with the corresponding superficial game-spirit, while others are very serious. And this is good.

This mainly has two clear consequences:

- 1) Conflict and misunderstanding between those playing with the heart and a serious mind versus the “players of the game”.
- 2) In comparison with reality, it is only fair to state that in our society too and especially where those in leading positions (politicians, leaders...) are concerned, emotions do not come into some decisions, which are simply a way of solving a problem quickly for practical or egocentric reasons. For those involved in society with honest intentions, this is discouraging and causes conflict.

The debriefing

As in other simulation exercises (“Social in EXclusion”, Limit 20, etc), the debriefing plays an essential role. One of the hardest parts for participants and trainer (but also the most interesting) is dealing with the feelings that Plan B generates; in particular knowing that each feeling and emotion is authentic and very personal. Each of them has experienced a newly created situation.

There will always be people who love the exercise and others who ... dislike it. Some people have clearly understood the aim and see the traps, dangers and possibilities while others stay behind still puzzled and needing time to understand more about what they have been through.

Debriefing of PLAN B happens in different steps. Besides talking about emotions and very practical situations, the crux of the debriefing is the link(s) to reality.

One of the first questions to the participants is where they would live in the society they have created. The majority point to the villa by the lake instead of the block of flats in the “ghetto” neighbourhood, despite the fact that they were responsible for building both of them - an interesting starting point for further discussion on how we (as social / youth workers) organise social action towards equality and quality of life for all! Moreover, how much and how deeply do we believe in these values, given the possibility to change roles in society (from youth worker to politician).

Through comparing the results of the exercise with what happens around us, participants become aware of the hidden forces and motivations of society’s leaders. It allows us to look behind the scenes and to understand better the decision-making process, which in turns allows us to act and react more appropriately to existing injustices.

Human behaviour as the key element.

People have the potential for the use or abuse of power in their hands. Will it change them?

I believe power does not change people but brings out what is somewhere inside each one of us. Just as clowning is the search for the inner-child, the inner-idiot, this exercise explores our basic human instinct for self-preservation to our own benefit.

In PLAN B money is the trigger to the use and abuse of power. Is it any different in reality?

To conclude, several key elements in this simulation exercise give PLAN B its strength. Besides the very realistic approach in the exercise, the fluctuating prices on the housing market etc. and the fact that none of the players has a role outside of their “own being”, this exercise also has practical advantages. It is visually attractive on account of its size, use of colours and materials and is easily prepared and run by one facilitator.

I’m looking forward to meeting you on one of the future PLAN B constructions and sincerely hope you prove me wrong.



In 2003, PLAN B got developed in high quality materials. With thanks to co-operation with Centre of Informative Games – Belgium (www.spelinfo.be)

PLAN B

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