



Feedback from FILSE to WASLI on the WASLI07 Conference in Segovia

This feedback is the result of a session with most of the members of the organizing committee 3 months after the conference, together with the impressions of the general coordinators of the committee, Saúl Villameriel and Brendan Costello.

To get an idea of how the members of the committee had experienced the conference and its organization, we asked them four simple questions:

1. What was your finest hour?
2. What was your darkest hour?
3. What was the biggest drag for you?
4. What advice would you give to the next organizers?

Lastly, at the end of this document, we offer feedback specifically related to the Sponsorship program and recommendations aimed at improving the organization of the Sponsorship program from the point of view of the conference organizers.

1. The best



- Our strongest point and the key to our success was to have a good coordinated team. The team had **two general coordinators**, which meant that nobody was under excessive pressure. The main team was established well over a year before the conference. From the start, each person was assigned to a specific area which had its own task list and associated deadlines. (The organization of the team members and their responsibilities was set out in a document.) In addition to the main team, during the actual conference members of the FILSE board joined in the organizational work: some of the board members were apprehensive that they had not been given enough information beforehand but by assigning each of them to a specific area of the team they were able to fit in easily and to help with the workload.
- The second secret to our success was to have a detailed budget and carefully controlled accounts. We were lucky to have a qualified and highly competent person in charge of finances, and this meant that money issues did not take up all our time and we could concentrate on other matters. Having said that, there was a slight lack of communication between the accounts section and the coordinators of the organizing committee: the coordinators were not aware of the healthy state of the finances until the conference itself and had been worried about what we could and could not afford to do. Certain decisions might have been taken differently (to improve the participants' stay) if we had known that we had money to spend.
- Much of the positive atmosphere and the rewarding experience of the conference was due to the ethos of the organizing team: we were determined that people were going to have a good time and to leave with a happy memory of WASLI07 and we did everything we could to make that happen. Again, the enthusiasm and the commitment of the team members were essential for this. If anything, we were perhaps too willing to please, and at times we almost wore ourselves out trying to meet everybody's needs. The three days of the conference were very intense, and

being able to offer some sort of treat or reward to overworked and exhausted team members was priceless; the masseur was originally intended for the working interpreters, but it was also an ideal means for overstressed volunteers to disconnect.

2. The worst



- Commented on by several people, the last couple of weeks before the conference were the most difficult part of the process. On top of various inevitable last minute details which required attention, we were inundated by e-mails and requests. Despite having closed the registration period, we received several last minute applications to register; in our effort to accommodate everybody, we made every attempt to fit these latecomers in, but this meant that the final numbers were not fixed and everything was up in the air. This did nothing to help our pre-conference stress, and had a knock-on effect on other issues which needed to be closed, such as meals, room allocation and accounts.
- Another area which could have been improved was the in-situ coordination between FILSE and WASLI. There was a generalized feeling among the FILSE volunteers that we were there to do all the work while the WASLI board members did little to help with the running of the conference. This was perhaps due to differing expectations of each group and a lack of communication between the two regarding their roles and responsibilities. We tried to solve the problem (too late) by having joint FILSE/WASLI meeting so that everybody knew who everyone else was and the part each person had to play. This should definitely be done at the outset before the conference starts to avoid misunderstandings.
- Many committee members were limited by their lack of English, and ended up feeling very frustrated at this as it meant that they could not participate and interact with others as much as they would have liked. Even though the option of making use of International Sign was there, the fact that all international visitors spoke English made it patent how important it is for communication (and socializing).

- The organization was weakest with the merchandising and the market place. We weren't too sure how it would work and although we had set aside a space for it, the details were left vague. This was partly exacerbated by a lack of clear information from stand holders, and several gave no previous notice of their intention to make use of the facility.
- Finally, there were several glitches that needed to be put right and couldn't be helped. One was inevitable: in a conference of nearly 300 people, it is only to be expected that there will be at least one rude and demanding individual, and this conference was no exception. The person in question was dealt with as courteously and correctly as possible, which is the only way to deal with such situations. A limitation in the number of hotel rooms created a logistical complication as a handful of participants had to be relocated to another hotel; this meant taxing people back and forth and created extra work at the busiest time of the conference. These were not major issues, but unfortunately they managed to make life complicated for some of the committee members during the conference.

3. *The drag*



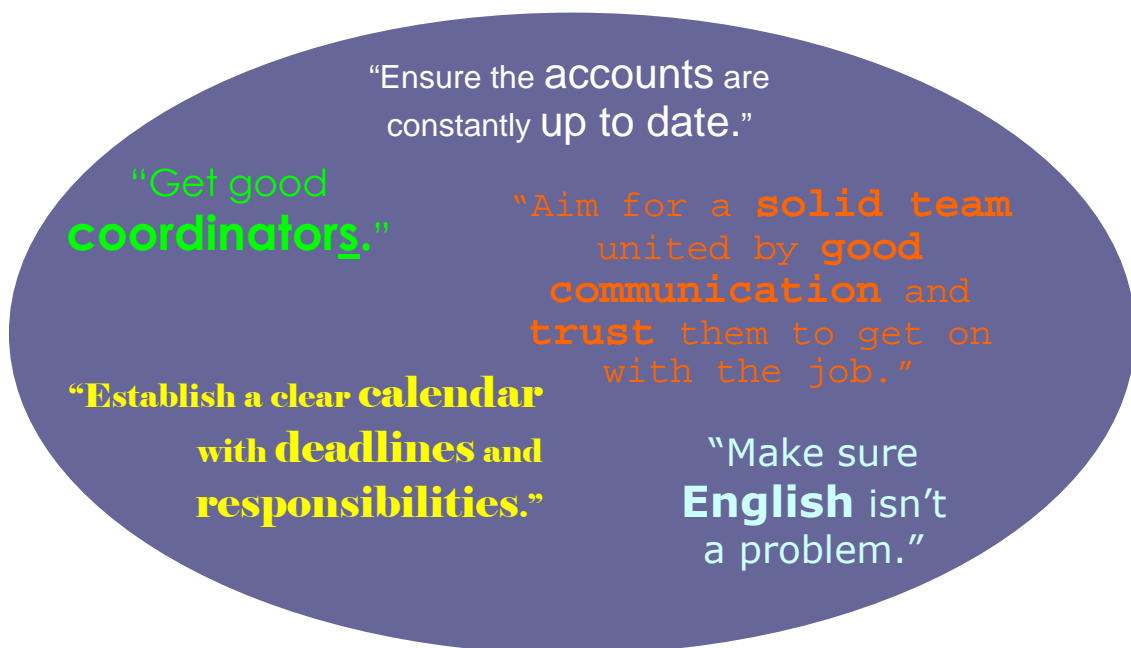
The organization of a conference necessarily involves doing tasks that nobody would choose to do, or putting yourself in situations which you'd rather not be in.

- Before the conference, and especially in the final weeks running up to the conference, the volume of e-mail enquiries was staggering. Despite having a website with detailed information, and standard model replies for many recurrent enquiries, keeping up with the e-mail was a huge task. After a while you feel like you are constantly answering questions of the type “If it's cold, will I need a cardie?”, but it's important to bear in mind that what seems obvious to you (because you've already e-mailed it 28 times) may not be to someone who is flying in from another continent. It would be a good idea to derive different e-mails to

different people so that the workload is spread (this wasn't really possible in our case because very few people on the committee could speak English).

- Organizing the transfers was a logistical nightmare that just had to be done. It was one of those jobs that is like a trying jigsaw puzzle in which many of the pieces either change shape constantly or give you no indication whatsoever as to their form. A major drag, but then again, newly arrived visitors really appreciate being whisked onto a bus to the hotel rather than having to negotiate a strange public transport system.
- During the conference itself, there was one bum task: 'looking after' the market place turned out to be a dull and thankless job that meant somebody was stuck in an almost empty room making sure that nothing got pinched (this was due to the general disorganization of the market place, but it's true that there will always be boring jobs like this to do).
- There were also several irksome situations mentioned: not knowing English was a thorn in the side for many committee members and made them feel slightly inadequate. Equally, the stress and pressure of the situation will wear patience down and people lose their calm and manners; one member was slightly taken aback by a colleague's rude response at one point. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it all: 'Life is not so short but that there is always time for courtesy'.
- A couple of people commented that there were moments when some sort of protocol would have ensured that everything ran more satisfactorily. As already mentioned, the presentation of the FILSE and WASLI boards should have been handled more adroitly, and there were other points during the conference when having a pre-established procedure would have made things smoother. This requires a certain amount of foresight by the organizers to judge when such protocol is needed.

4. The pearl of wisdom



- The cornerstone to the organization of an event like this are the people behind it. The team needs to be enthusiastic and competent, and driven by coordinators with a clear vision. The team must be made up of individuals with a variety of skills and talents (from balancing the books to persuading a web designer friend to do us a favour, from translating documents to negotiating a discount with the national airline), all of whom are foolish enough to commit themselves to hours of work and worry. Having more than one coordinator may seem like creating a many-headed monster, but for such a large undertaking it's important to have the responsibility shared; obviously, the coordinators need to be able to work well together and to coordinate between themselves as well as the entire team. We found it extremely useful to set out a plan of action in terms of what needed to be done, by whom and for when. This meant putting in a fair bit of work at the beginning, but a central reference document of this sort (which we adapted from eflsi's material) was a great help throughout the 18 months of preparation.
- Without people, there's no show; without money, it'll be a very poor affair. The finances of the conference are central to its success. We wanted to make the conference as economical as possible for visitors without ending up with any debts, so it was essential to keep track of things from the start. The budget was clearly set out, taking into account all expenses and income, and kept up to date right up to the conference. It's essential for the coordinator(s) to be kept abreast of this information: knowing what the state of your balance is not only reduces the terrible stress of juggling a 6-figure (euro) budget but also allows you take informed decisions about how much you can spend and on what, when the time arises. Also, having the accounts in order at the conference makes life much easier for the people dealing with money matters on site.
- The final piece of advice is probably not so relevant for the next conference in South Africa (but may be in future editions) and is perhaps more of a reflection of the personal trauma suffered by many of the organizing committee. Speaking English is a great advantage when taking part in the organization of an international event, and having no English ends up being a handicap. This is true not only during the event, but also for the preparations, when international correspondence and so on must be conducted in English.

The Sponsorship program

Taking as our point of departure that the Sponsorship Program (SP) for WASLI2007 was a huge success and that it does a tremendous job in reaching out to countries which would not otherwise be able to attend and participate in the WASLI conference, the following recommendations are aimed towards improving the administrative running of the SP in its dealings with the organizing committee of the conference. Essentially they deal with the lines of communication between the different people involved in the process, attempting to clarify who should be giving what information to whom:

- The contact between the SP and the Organizing Committee was maintained between the people in charge of the SP (Robin Demko/Deb Russell) and one of the Committee coordinators (Brendan Costello). This worked well and it was extremely useful to have a clear communication channel. There was occasionally the need to coordinate additionally with Zane, as WASLI Secretary, who received various enquiries and requests from all over the place. I recall receiving a couple of random e-mails from Daniel (Burch) about SP-related issues, and while I suspect he did a lot of money chasing and getting, to this day I am still not clear about what his role was. **Communication channels should be kept simple and there should be clearly demarcated representatives for both the SP and the Organizing Committee.** (This is also important as slightly sensitive information is dealt with.)
- From the point of view of the Organizing committee, the only information required from the SP is a list of sponsorees and the amount of money that has been paid to cover their registration. More information is useful but should not be necessary for the organizers as the sponsorees should go through the normal registration process (see the next point below). However, reality is not so straightforward: the SP is not completely centralised and some sponsorships are taken care of individually between the sponsor and the sponsoree. The simplest scenario (for the Registration Section) would be for all the sponsor money to be paid via the SP. However, this might mean generating excessive bank costs as money is transferred from sponsors to the SP to the Conference account. The next best option is for the SP to merely ensure that it coordinates all sponsorship activity, keeping tabs of sponsors, their donations and sponsorees. In this way, **the SP could send the Organizing Committee a list of the names of sponsorees and of the money that they should expect to receive (and from whom).**
- The registration process for the sponsorees was a messier affair than it should have been. We got the impression that they felt that everything was being looked after, while often their sponsors (understandably) had little idea that somebody had to fill in the forms. In the end we had to chase up sponsorees (often via a convoluted chain involving the SP and their sponsors) to get them to fill the forms in. This may sound like petty bureaucracy but it meant having 12 people unaccounted for; and given that space was limited, it also nearly meant that they had nowhere to sleep. **The SP should let the sponsorees know that they have to register themselves;** this would mean that the sponsorees are processed in the normal way along with everyone else and also they can be contacted directly if necessary.
- Stemming from the previous point, once a sponsoree has registered any **registration issues should be addressed directly to the Organizers** (not to the

SP or to the Sponsors, which just creates unnecessary work for them). Once such issue is obtaining a visa. We were aware of this issue (not only for sponsorees but for any participants coming from developing countries) and had looked into what we could do to help from our end by checking the relevant regulations, providing letters of invitation/support and even faxing/phoning embassies when necessary. This is part of the Organizers' job and they are the best suited to doing it as they are operating on home turf (embassies are much more likely to pay attention to someone from their own country speaking the same language than some local who claims to be a "sign language interpreter" and is after a visa). Since the Registration Section had already done the background work, we already knew what steps to take and had indeed taken them for various individuals. There may be circumstances in which the Registration Section has to check with the SP before making claims about the financial **Help with visa applications should be handled by the host country Organizing committee.**

- Given that there were various changes to the list of sponsorees (several having to pull out), especially at the last minute, it would make sense to try to **leave as large a margin as possible between processing the sponsorees and the Conference itself**, rather than keeping to the normal registration deadlines. Some of the above recommendations should help to speed up the registration process for the sponsorees, but it would be worth considering placing earlier deadlines on sponsorees to take into account such complications as obtaining visas. Also, in the event that they have to drop out, this would leave more time to find and organize alternative sponsorees. In this case, the only requirement for the Organizing Committee would be to receive an updated list of Sponsorees from the SP (and the registration forms from the new sponsoree).

Best wishes and good luck to WASLI, to the next conference organizers and to the wonderful work done by the Sponsorship program: may it be one in a long line of successful conferences.

¡Os deseamos mucho éxito!