

Rethinking the Present to Design the Future: Choosing Sustainability

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July marked the fifth edition of the 'East Forum,' sponsored by east magazine, the UniCredit Group and the LUISS Guido Carli University. Sustainability was this year's theme, with speakers from all walks of life discussing how the world will have to change to make room not only for the needs of the environment but also social and economic change. The consensus was that real change is cultural and educational. Safeguarding the planet's future means teach its residents that future exists in the present.

The concept of sustainability

The concept of sustainability was introduced in 1983 by the Brundtland Report, which defined it as a growth path that would allow for the needs of present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In essence, the concept meant using the present as a means to look out for future generations. Since the report was published, the scope of sustainability has widened considerably. Ecological and environmental issues have been supplemented by scientific disciplines and attention to aspects of everyday life. While still taking in the fundamental environmental dimension, the concept of sustainability has been enlarged to include economic status, social affairs and governance itself.

In terms of historical development, the time may be ripe to rethink the most basic

aspects of development because. As OECD Deputy Secretary-General Pier Carlo Padoan has pointed out, periods of crisis are often well-suited to triggering changes in the way a society's leader actors behave. A paradigm shift in priorities has affected all aspects of society, as the differing backgrounds of the forum's participants suggested. National and state entities, supranational entities, local governments, businesses, academia, NGOs and individuals are all involved in the process of rethinking development. A number of key challenges must be faced head-on. They include climate change and the development of the green economy; the fight against poverty in the most disadvantaged countries; in advanced nations, the balancing out of inequities as a tool to improve social cohesion.

At the forum, the topics addressed by speakers, moderators and audience members included how to measure of sustainability as well as the ways of locating both progress and decay in social, economic and environmental terms. Governance also came up repeatedly, as did economic cooperation, the role of the green economy, and the theme of social diversity. In his opening remarks, French economist Jean-Paul Fitoussi questioned the viability of current development models in terms of their impact on the world that lies ahead. Sustainability, he said, has costs that won't be easy to maintain, particularly for

the planet's younger generation. What exactly will young people will inherit? That is, what kinds of human, economic and natural capital will be available to them? Will the "grant" bestowed by today's generation be sufficient for youth to invest in its own future, as well as the environment and ecology? Linked to the youth issue is one of vulnerability, which Enrico Giovannini, who heads Italy's statistics institute ISTAT, sought to emphasize. While vulnerability may still be difficult to quantitatively measure and monitor, since steadfast indicators are lacking, the recent financial and economic crisis made vulnerability into a commonplace, a demonstrable, experiential concept that all society has been forced to endure. Some themes recurred, including the matter of social and personal responsibility, education, and urban sustainability.

Responsibility

The debate between speakers and audience members highlighted the extent to which sustainability demands a sense of responsibility and follow-through on the part of all those involved in the process. On this point, all the speakers agreed. State entities can no longer be expected to bear the whole load, or even ensure the process. Instead, responsibility must be shared between leaders and citizens, between rich nations and developing ones, between corporate entities and consumer groups.

While all citizens have a passive role as the recipients of rules to which they're compelled to adhere, they also have an active one, namely the potential to influence decision-making. Only a communal sense of shared responsibility can produce sustainability that influences both what is made and what is consumed, as well the very nature of the social compact.

The role of political institutions in this arena is very delicate for several reasons. In this regard, Italian Deputy Minister Adolfo Urso underscored the matter of time frames and political mandates. While politicians might seek to undertake changes designed to improve long-term sustainability, they remained at the mercy of temporal limits, in the form of elections. In this sense, the role of public opinion was

perceived as crucial. Though public opinion is on the one hand the recipient of decisions made by political classes, on the other it can help influence the ruling class through assembly and organization.

Two representatives of European institutions, Vaira Vike-Freiberga and Benita Ferrero-Waldner, suggested an as-yet unrealized example of this potential dichotomy. Both remarked that a sense of shared "Europeanness," vital to powering the intergovernmental action necessary to triggering sustainable policy choices, had so far been lacking not only among the members of national political classes but also among European citizens. At the same time, they noted, it was essential to keep in mind the economic and cultural costs of sustainability, which for some might be seen as ex-

ceedingly hard to digest, particularly in times of global economic turbulence.

Compared to national institutions, international organizations can play a decisive role in mitigating the inequities that divide different parts of the world from each other. Such organizations have supranational platform that stands in for sovereignty. Their role will be increasingly necessary to address economic, environmental and social challenges.

The role played by agriculture on a global level helps summarize the nature of the challenge. Groups will need to invest to help feed a growing population. At the same they can also play a useful role in slowing climate change and combating inequality and poverty. Kanayo Nwanze, who heads the Rome-based International



Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and Michele Candotti, secretary-general of the Italian branch of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), agreed on the need to pay closer attention to the environment so to help ensure greater prosperity and, as a result, greater social stability. The struggle against global corruption saw a convergence of opinion between Jermyn Brooks and Imon Akpofure. Both saw the beating back of corruption as a means to stabilize the state, freeing resources toward developmental aims while helping to promote and apply more stringent ethical standards in the managing of companies and the state itself. The business world is increasingly involved when it

AN ECO-SUSTAINABLE FORUM

Taking a cue from the debate on sustainability, the organizers of the east Forum structured the meeting to ensure that all its day-to-day events would have zero impact on the environment. Some of the measures adopted included using only recyclable paper; ensuring speakers were moved from venue-to-venue in electric-powered cars; and using only renewable energy sources throughout the event. Even the onsite buffet was structured with zero-impact in mind.

Since it wasn't possible to cancel out each and every environmental impact, whatever CO₂ emissions generated by the Forum were offset by the purchase of emission credits from a volunteer market offered by a Chicago-based project dedicated to the reining in of methane gas. Finally, an independent company officially certified the Forum's zero-impact status. ●

comes to making decisions in favor of sustainability, making the issue of responsibility a paramount one. Business leaders are increasingly recognized as crucial actors on the economic scene, as Lord Michael Hastings pointed out in his remarks. Commitment on the part of these business figures is increasingly important in financial terms.

Unicredit Group CEO Alessandro Profumo noted that choices made in favor of sustainability should be dictated less in terms of maintaining a company's profile among its shareholders and more in terms of making choices aimed toward preserving the health of a company over time and give it solid foundation on which to grow. Business journalist Franco De Benedetti highlighted the need to keep costs under control so that the process of ensuring sustainability through specific actions is based on available resources.

The final responsibility, however, lies with empowering citizens themselves, whether they're seen as individuals or as members of various groups.

Expanding citizen responsibility means changing their role from that of passive actors to active agents of change. It also allows them to interact with institutions that, over time, will be located closer and closer to home, thanks to the extension of the subsidiary process. Possessing a more active role in the decision-making process is likely to raise awareness and make citizens more willing to take on the challenges and changes any policy of sustainability will demand.

Education and Culture

The theme of education as an engine for sustainable development also found adherents among speakers, though a variety of opinion emerged regarding what form such an educational commitment

would take. Culture and education are obviously fundamental to any awareness of the processes of sustainability. A change in educational and cultural processes, for example, could help promote the teaching of ethics, which would be of particularly benefit to youth. But this teaching would need to extend to business and political classes, which increasingly require a greater measure of ethical leadership.

Education and culture can yield different kinds of "virtuousness" in the context of any given society. Consider multiethnic coexistence, a key issue in all discussion of sustainability. Or the potential development of "enlightened" consumers and executives, whose broader awareness of issues might help encourage companies to implement sustainability policies. Potential changes in social welfare, said Italian Senator Tiziano Treu, might also yield grass root organization from below, by citizens themselves, in support of more traditional forms of aid and solidarity.

Artist Monia Ovadia was provocative on the subject, inviting speakers to rethink the future of the EU based on cultural priorities. Culture, she said, should represent EU's social glue, tying together the citizens of all member states and opening a pan-European debate on the ways and means of communicating the importance sustainability and accountability. Benita Ferrero-Waldner agreed in principle, but stressed the complexity of transforming these kinds of desirable educational intentions into effective and decisive policy.

Cities

Any study of the future of sustainable development can't bypass an extensive analysis of future urban systems, since most the world population already lives in sprawling cities, particularly in developing countries.

The city should be seen as part of the solution to the issue of sustainability and livability, and not part of the problem. It's a final refuge place for social solidarity. It can also help refine new behavior and ways of living, reconciling the growth of urban space with the environmental and developmental needs.

Increasingly, the "green city" concept is making its mark, mostly through the development urban centers that more consistently attempt to respect the needs of nature. New materials, architectural ideas, energy sources and alterations in the waste management cycle can all help reduce the impact that urban life has on deteriorating the environment. An example comes from China, where officials are expanding cities while taking into account sustainability policies and applying "green" standards. China's efforts demonstrate how even newly industrialized countries, often accused of being disrespectful toward environmental regulations, can instead be agents of change.

The challenges faced by local administrators range include how to handle urban mobility and manage various levels of so-

cial diversity. The challenges posed by intense traffic, and the pollution in causes, excessive waste production, and urban security problems are being countered development of intelligent transport systems, better waste recycling, and inclusive social policies. But these kinds of responses can't replace a cultural commitment to changing the way city dwellers think and act. Regarding urban living and quality of life, Jaime Lerner, former mayor of the Brazilian city of Curitiba, and Gianni Alemanno, the current Rome mayor, made significant remarks. Lerner reminded participants that change could occur in a matter of a few years. There's no need to await all the answers posed by sustainability to begin acting on implementing proven ideas, said Lerner. On the contrary, the introduction of just a few innovations alongside better urban civics makes cities more livable in the short term. The results can then be conveyed by children, who convey them to adults, making them a powerful engine in the transmission of knowledge and awareness.

Rome's Alemanno noted that adopting sustainability priorities didn't translate in-

to a loss of competitiveness. The can and should be a strong bond between sustainability and development, he said. There was no reason that sustainable urban development should put a crimp in consumption, and in development as a result, said Alemanno. It was increasingly necessary to qualify the idea of quantity into one that includes the importance quality.

Conclusions

Pier Carlo Padoan concluded the forum by noting the obstacles faced by any society that seeks tailor a developmental path to the needs sustainability, and that as a result such an enterprise requires unanimous support and action from institutions, enterprises and citizens. A policy of debt-containment wasn't sufficient, he insisted. Regulatory action was needed to remove obstacles to growth. Investment in research and development by companies wouldn't suffice by itself; fresh ideas were also needed. Even developing a green economy couldn't stand on its right unless supplemented by an individual and cultural decision to place innovation at the heart of all growth. ●

