

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

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Two friends were watching the eleven o'clock news. A report came on that a man, perched on a very tall building, was threatening to jump. One of the two friends turned to the other and said: "I bet he is not going to jump". "I will take that bet," replied the other. And the man jumped.

"Well, I guess I lost my bet," sighed the first and offered his friend the money. "I cannot take your money," the other confessed, "You see, I saw this same report on the six o'clock news." "No, you won the bet fair and square," his friend insisted, "I saw the report on the six o'clock news, too, and I did not think he would do it a second time."

The question is, do we have a second chance? Are we going to make better use of our situation or merely repeat history? The past year has seen me deeply involved with the question of sustainability and the meaning of the term, and the writing of a major paper for the United Nations Environmental Programme and an international conference, which has been struggling with the same issues that we all struggle with at home. Here are some thoughts concerning these issues.

What does sustainability mean? In the Brundtland Report, sustainability is defined, in the narrowest sense of the word, as the making sure that we leave enough resources for the next generation. This definition trivialises the enormity of the task before us. It is not just a matter of leaving enough resources. Sustainability, with regard to the extraction of minerals and resources, agriculture, transportation, energy and information systems - the factors which drive modern economies - has to deal with sustainability in many dimensions.

There has to be sustainability in production. Clean, safe technologies, that satisfy peoples' needs have to be created, but there is a need, also for concern with sustainable consumption patterns. The profit motive, which drives entrepreneurs, the desire to sell, naturally has a built-in bias, assuming the existence of an ever-increasing consumer-society. The developed world knows that increased consumption cannot be sustained world-wide at the levels at which the United States, Europe and Japan have been consuming, so there is an inherent conflict. We need to have a sustainable consumption pattern which changes the rules of the game. The challenge is to see how we can concentrate enough wealth to produce efficient goods and satisfy needs without letting such a system drive us toward endless consumption and so cause disparities of wealth between nations. We need sustainability not only in production and consumption but in employment. The question is: does clean production mean lean production and loss of jobs, or does it imply something very different? Not only do we need employment, consumption and production - what the economist conceives of as a "closed system" - but we need to create sustainable livelihoods.

Sustainable livelihood means that people have sufficient purchasing power to buy the goods that they need. Everybody participates in the economic system, not merely those who have a livelihood. People need to be involved in the entire process. The trend today is to make things less labour-intensive and more capital-intensive; efficient, but who is to provide for those who need the work more than the products consumed?

It is a major issue. There is an emerging under-class in the developed countries. We talk of the North and the South as if they were two different places. Come to Southeast Los Angeles in the United States, to New York City, go to London's East-End and you will see "South" enough! The "South" is not in Burma or in Indonesia alone. We are creating a two-tier society, one which involves consumers, workers and producers and one which has people who need to work, who neither consume nor produce above minimal level. This is a very dangerous political trend. Herein lies the root of the tension. Who owns these technologies and who has a role to play? Ideologies and disciplinary biases play an enormous role in policy-making.

The political systems deal with the players at the table, re-allocating the eating, now to the right, now to the left, then vice-versa. But it is as pointless as rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic - shifted as they may be, the vessel is still doomed to sink. New places need to be created at the table. Governments have roles to play as the trustees, not only of future generations but of future technologies. They must represent the technologies which will displace the technologies that no longer serve. In the developed and developing world, there are "geriatric" technological systems. They are a "geriocrata," dominated by great, long established institutions created with the capacities to serve only by-gone needs and interests. They are out of touch, they are old, they are inappropriate. New institutions must be created.

The latest attempt to squeeze the last from existing production systems, known as the "globalisation" of the world economy, should be looked at with great trepidation. What is being inferred by the "globalisation" of the world economy is the notion that: "It is OK in our own countries," whether we are talking about developed or developing. "It is OK that people do not have jobs and cannot consume, because the

United States can sell to the emerging middle-classes in Asia or South America." So we create this international global package of consumers, producers and workers, while in our own countries, we develop a large underclass of people who are not part of the system. This is not only politically unstable but extremely unwise. It utilises the untapped capacities of existing production systems, but does not pave the way for new kinds of technologies with new parameters. Ideology is extremely important here. Whether governments alone should choose winners and losers is a matter for some disagreement.

Everything seems to be done to keep old technologies and to create high concentrations of economic power, multi-national corporations, which have ceased to be national in any shape or form. Where, however, is the attention to self-reliance? Where are the small, entrepreneurial and small-to-medium enterprises, that are so essential to employment? There is an ideological difference as to whether we should be content to satisfy ourselves with incremental change, or whether radical changes, dramatic changes ought to be brought about. We can simply tinker with better pesticides or we can reconstruct the entire agricultural production system. This is a very different approach, and the problem is, who is to own the new organisation? Industrialists will try to cling to what they have been doing in the past. It is only the governments in the final analysis that can provide the opportunities for the implementation of new technologies.

A way must be found to protect the real stakeholders, not only the consumers but the people involved in networking and in creativity institutions, political, industrial, the so-called learning institutions: not just a new package not just a new model, but one which can have the capacity for change, designing for the environment; designing appropriate technologies in an appropriate way.

There is an enormously important role for the international leading institutions: the World Bank, the EBRD, the Asian Development Bank. It is from these institutions that developing countries obtain the money to produce the technologies to provide for them. The institutional record is miserable. If their investments are examined, they are found to be fundamentally inappropriate to the 21st century. They are playing with players already seated at the table. There is no vision. There is no sense of responsibility.

There is no simple formula for any one country. Poland, which has an extensive well-established venerable industrial system which also pollutes extensively, cannot simply close its factories. What you do in Poland is different from what you do in Serbia. The stakeholders have to be involved. A way has to be found to make the government, the trustee of the future, which does not mean involving the existing players only. It involves vision, it makes demands. What if interests are "Balkanised"? Balkanisation is today's charmless "buzz-word," as charmless as the fragmentation of knowledge that allows the existence of a power structure which forbids examination of the system as a whole. To come back full circle, replaying that report of the man jumping off the building is something to be avoided. There will be countless others jumping off many taller buildings if a solution is not found.

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