

Bio-diplomacy

The future of international relations

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Some philosopher once said: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it also can only be lived forward." At the turn of a century, it is important to look back in order to learn from our past mistakes, but more importantly, to use the successes of the past as the pillars of the future.

Despite the massive and unequalled accumulation of knowledge during the 20th Century, it is ironic that the destruction caused by high-tech wars and the negative impact of our lifestyle on the environment were bigger than in any previous century. That is an indictment, not only against political and industrial leaders but against mankind as a whole. We are squandering the inheritance of our children.

What we need is a fundamental change of philosophy: we must move away from a culture of development and progress at all cost to a philosophy of responsible and sustainable development, also taking cognisance of the interdependence of all forms of life. We need people with vision and drive to steer us away from the destructive course of current trends.

I wish to congratulate the President and Founder of the Biopolitics International Organisation, Dr. Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis, for her vision and the amount of time and energy she is devoting in order to create a better tomorrow for our children. Her endeavours to create awareness and to bring like-minded people together are increasingly acknowledged and appreciated internationally.

Promotion of peace and protection of the environment goes hand in hand. In this context, the present initiative of the Greek government to re-introduce the Olympic Truce and to establish an Olympic Truce Centre at Ancient Olympia is a worthy cause and deserves the unanimous support of the international community.

Former President Nelson Mandela sent the following message to the people of Greece in this regard: "It was a source of great sustenance and succour to me to have been proclaimed by the Council of Ancient Olympia as an Honorary Citizen in 1983 at a time when I was still in prison. To be so honoured for fighting for those ideals - freedom, democracy and world peace - which were ages ago already nourished on the sacred ground of Olympia, inspired us to continue that struggle. I have been informed of the plans to re-establish the Olympic Truce that in antiquity all participants in the Olympic Games were required to observe, obliging them to cease all hostilities during that period. This development may, we hope, give further impetus to the idea of universal peace in our time and to the discouragement of war. This initiative therefore has my full support. I join you in wishing for a world of peace in our lifetime."

Today, we have more international peace treaties and agreements on nature conservation than ever before. Why then do we still have war and why is the environment deteriorating at such an alarming pace? There is too much talk in general about global responsibility and grand schemes. A more practical and realistic approach should be followed.

Countries in the same region, facing similar threats and opportunities, or phrasing it differently, those countries sharing common interests, are more likely to co-operate on issues such as peace and the environment. As far as conservation is concerned, a regional approach also makes biological sense. Individual parks and reserves can become biologically diminished islands. Scientists are now saying that, in order to preserve what remains of the natural world, we must protect entire ecological regions, not just isolated parks. The basis for this is the interdependence of all forms of life for which the artificial borders drawn by man to define countries, has no meaning. It is vital that international relations will in the future accommodate this reality.

In South Africa, we are blessed with large game reserves. The well known Kruger National Park, for example, which was founded in 1898 stretches over an area of just under 20,000 square kilometres - the size of all the Greek islands put together. However, the realities we are facing today are different from those that existed with the establishment of the Kruger Park a century ago: on the one hand, there is the challenge of meeting the needs of large and growing populations in Africa south of the Sahara, and on the other hand, there is the opportunity of transborder co-operation due to the improved political situation in our part of the world.

Against this background and in view of the importance of protecting entire regions, a South African, Dr. Anton Rupert, came forward with a new vision - a vision of peace parks stretching over national borders. The aim is transborder co-operation in the whole of the southern African region in order to conserve wildlife, the environment and biodiversity; to boost tourism in an environmentally-friendly manner and to improve the quality of life of those people living on the borders of such parks.

It speaks for itself that the positive spin-offs of this initiative are regional co-operation, peace and stability, something which is also vital for the conservation of our planet. The size of one of these transborder peace parks, bordering South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, will be 90,000 square kilometres - equal to the size of Portugal.

It was the Roman soldier Pliny the Elder who said: "There is always something new out of Africa." I believe that this is a new example out of Africa that is worth following. Its success is guaranteed by the fact that all the people in the region will benefit from this - they are involved as stakeholders and take ownership of the initiative. Once again, they share common interests. The same principles are applicable to other ecological, regions of the world.

But regional co-operation does not replace global responsibility. During the industrial revolution and periods of high growth and urbanisation, deforestation took place in Europe and elsewhere. Today, similar developments in other regions of the world, such as South America and Africa, lead to deforestation and the destruction of sensitive ecological areas. In view of their own histories, the rich countries of the industrialised world cannot merely point fingers: they do not only have a stake in the protection of these areas, but also a responsibility.

One area where a refocus is urgently necessary is that of science and technology: the inequalities of income across the globe are actually exceeded by the inequalities of scientific output and technological innovation. If the science and technology resources of the rich countries could be made available to poor countries, the need for the destruction of sensitive ecological areas in order to provide food for growing populations, will diminish.

Using current technologies and seed types, the tropics are inherently less productive in annual food crops, such as wheat, rice and maize. Most agriculture in the equatorial tropics is of very low productivity, reflecting the fragility of most tropical soils at high temperatures combined with heavy rainfall. In the wet-dry tropics, such as the vast savannahs of Africa, agriculture is hindered by the burdens of unpredictable and highly variable water supplies.

Science and technology available in the rich countries, could make a difference in these regions. The big life-sciences firms should somehow be motivated to turn their research towards tropical foodstuffs. Governments will have to play an active role in this regard. According to Calestous Juma, one of the world's authorities on biotechnology in Africa, there are dozens, or perhaps hundreds of under-utilised foodstuffs that are well adapted to the tropics and could be improved through directed biotechnology research.

History has taught us that no fundamental changes in the socio-economic world will take place without an awareness of the need for such changes. This is where bio-diplomacy could play a role. Diplomats who have the advantage of global exposure, also have a duty to sensitise their respective governments of their global responsibilities and the importance of active involvement in the promotion of peace and environmental protection within their own regions.

The vision of Dr. Vlavianos-Arvanitis and others to integrate values such as peace and environmental protection into the culture and spirit of the Olympic Games, will no doubt strengthen a global awareness of these vital ingredients for a harmonious future. A harmonious future, in the full sense of the word, will only be possible if the interdependence of all forms of life, free of the restrictions of artificial borders drawn by man, is fully recognised and accommodated in the conduct of international relations. Since common interests are the uniting factors in

preventing wars and the destruction of our planet, those common Interests must be identified as a priority: first, on the local and regional levels, but also globally. Bio-diplomacy could be instrumental in both bilateral and multilateral fields.