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The Agenda of Sustainable Development¹

Industry Speaks

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Abstract

A new generation of industries will gradually replace those inherited from the Industrial Revolution; that process will be a sort of “rural industrialization”, with new, copious and cheaper products of higher quality and less impact on the environment.

Within this new paradigm, sustainable development challenges will not only include the impacts on the environment or social issues, construed as those included within the “goals of the millennium”, but governing such transformations. How will decisions be made in a more integrated and interdependent world so that this process is inclusive? Who will have the ability or responsibility to make these processes possible?

Keywords: sustainable development, environmental impact, consumption habits

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Introduction

Sustainable development (SD) may be understood as a way of inclusive progress of society. “Progress for Everybody” was the motto of the recent Summit of the Americas. Thus, I take for granted that SD includes a better quality of life, higher happiness indexes, a greater ability to meet needs, improved education and health levels, and more opportunities for those willing to have them - an aspect that requires a greater ability to understand the world, its dynamics, opportunities, and challenges.

It is sustainable because I believe that time does not degrade this process; on the contrary, it enhances and envisages it to a higher extent. On the one hand, I could presume that SD means a growing and extensive well-being with no limits for each and all human beings. On the other hand, I believe that SD may have various meanings depending on cultures, the phase of society or its prevailing paradigm.

Within this framework, I think we have developed a notion of well-being and, therefore, of SD, with standards derived from industrial society, with a pattern of consumption and particular habits, with ownership of property as the core of satisfaction. Each human being requires a house, a refrigerator, a car that uses fossil fuel, prefers to eat proteins or use oil instead of cereals or vegetables. At this pace, if a significant portion of the world population continues to adopt these consumption habits, many planets will be required to satisfy our needs. All lands available would not be enough to produce more food; minerals, oil and other sources of energy will also be insufficient. Just to mention an example: an average American consumer use twice as much energy as a typical European consumer and four times more than an average Latin American consumer. The discussion on SD should include deep thought about these issues since there is no solution to the problem that such an increase in the consumption of goods would cause.

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However, moving from an industrial society to a society of knowledge brings about good news to some of these issues. We are walking towards a society where the tendency is to share goods, where satisfaction is less frequently based on using material objects and focuses more on experiences as well as on the consumption of services instead of products. That is to say, a society that focuses on flow control more than on the ownership of stocks.

Owning a PC with Internet access already seems to be more important than having a car in certain geographies and segments of society. Should this tendency – seen in more advanced societies – increase, we will probably face a change in consumption habits.

With regard to agribusiness-related issues, we will witness a fascinating change given the fact that plants are used more and more as bioreactors, and they not only produce food (proteins, carbohydrates, or fibers) but also varied ways of energy, industrial enzymes, plastics, or medicines. Consequently, we are looking at small “industrial plants” or a “green industry” that uses clean and renewable energies, such as solar energy, where leaves are some kind of efficient “panels”. These “factories” have original designs that come in a chip, which is the seed, and

which determines their features; instead of having smokestacks and issuing gases, they consume the atmosphere's carbon dioxide.

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I believe a new generation of industries will gradually replace those inherited from the Industrial Revolution; that process will be a sort of "rural industrialization", with new, copious and cheaper products of higher quality and less impact on the environment.

Within this new paradigm, SD's challenges will not only include the impacts on the environment or social issues, construed as those included within the "goals of the millennium", but governing such transformations. How will decisions be taken in a more integrated and interdepending world so that this process is inclusive? Who will have the ability or responsibility to make these processes possible?

Undoubtedly, these trends place the State and its ability to adapt to this new paradigm in the center of the scene. The extent to which this process will produce an extensive well-being with no frontiers will depend on such State's quality and intelligence.

During the recent Summit, several Heads of State of the Americas clearly introduced this issue into the agenda; governance is required based on consensus, institutional character, predictability, and a safe framework. They also discussed about pragmatism in the Government's actions and a State that adapts to changes; they stated that they consider a "good government" one that is efficient (I personally think there are various ways of efficiency), effective, transparent, and accountable to society.

The responsibility of such State transformation goes beyond governments or political groups and includes civil society as a whole and, of course, businesspeople, who will be responsible for undertaking risks, investment capacity, and creativity in view of this new age's challenges. The process must create public goods and build social capital. Public-private associations may be a good platform to drive these actions.

Meanwhile, the social agenda knocks at our doors every day: structural poverty, economic unreliability with consequences on the pension plan, inequality, and violence together with organized crime, income differences between the rich and the poor, the youngsters that do not study or work, the problem of access to housing, the need of high-quality education, how to create employment and, especially, employability. The environmental agenda requires joint actions at a local and global level so as to find solutions to climate change, deforestation, the problem of access to water, and sea control.

The discussion of these issues should speed up and intensify. There are solutions available, and this is why sustainable development should go beyond an ethical discussion and should be included within the authorities' agenda.

The agenda of sustainable development must include the pressing problems of the social and environmental agenda, reviewing consumption habits, the State's quality, the development of

new ways of global government, and the productive paradigm's transformation with the emergence of "green industries".