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“THE POWER OF THE MIND” ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE CLUB OF ROME, BUCHAREST 2012

NOTE: THIS IS AN INFORMAL MEMOIRE OF SOME OF THE MAIN IDEAS AT THE CONFERENCE BASED ON THE WRITER’S NOTES; IT IS NOT AN OFFICIAL CLUB OF ROME DOCUMENT



Introduction

The October 2012 Club of Rome Conference was held at Bucharest. It was the first Club of Rome Annual Conference held at Bucharest since the equally successful September 1999 “How to Ride the Global Wave” event. The 1999 conference was useful in alerting participants to emerging issues worth monitoring; the 2012 one has provided a similar valuable service. (Between these two events the Romanian Association for The Club of Rome had held a number of other successful gatherings).

Most of the 2012 conference events were held at the building of the National Bank of Romania. This is one of the world’s oldest central banks (33 years older than the US one). The Governor, Mugur Isarescu, gave a lecture on the Future of the International Banking which analysed the current financial crisis, looked at ways in which the crisis could be solved, and explained how a banking union could assist European financial integration.



The Club’s Roots

The Club’s roots go back to an informal 1968 gathering where it was recognized that the world was in trouble but the causes were not entirely clear. They seemed to be a tangled mixture of demography, resource consumption and economic inequality.

Those participants agreed to commission a report Limits to Growth, published to great acclaim in 1972. The 2012 conference was therefore the 40th anniversary of the book and some of the proceedings were based on this milestone.

By 1972, then, The Club of Rome had established its unique global role: thinking at the cutting edge on the predicament of humankind.

The Club's main activities are (i) production of Reports (ii) stimulating debates (iii) holding meetings (iv) entering into partnerships with organizations that share The Club's concerns. Its main areas of current work are: (i) economics (ii) values/ ethics and (iii) energy.

I work in the Australian mass media industry. I was struck by the mismatch between what The Club is discussing and what gets covered on a daily basis in the Australian news:

- The Club deals with complexity and the interconnectedness of issues; the media prefer superficial short snappy issues.
- The Club deals with problems and policies; the media focus on personalities.
- The Club is searching for positive solutions; the media prefer doom and gloom and bad news.
- The Club takes a global perspective on issues; the media are nationally-focussed (the murder of one Australian will get far more coverage, than, say, the death of thousands of Africans).

This observation does not negate the Club's worth. On the contrary it reaffirms the value of the work because The Club is doing what most of the media are failing to do: it is alerting people to emerging issues and solutions.

✓ **The Power of the Mind**

Another of The Club's early Reports was the 1979 No Limits to Learning which examined the importance of education. One of the authors, Mircea Malitza, was a participant at the 2012 conference.

The 2012 conference reaffirmed the importance of education. First, we are now in an era where the power of the mind is a key factor. In previous eras human muscle was important for agriculture and mining and then working in factories. We can now produce more commodities and manufactured items than ever before - but with fewer people.

The key to sustainable growth nowadays is mobilizing brain power. Education is not a guarantee of national success – but it is a guarantee against national failure; no currently flourishing country has an uneducated population.

Second, The Club has touched on many areas for education, such as the need for sustainability, an awareness of the running down of natural resources, and the range of possible solutions.

Third, politicians and many journalists do not know how to respond to The Club's information. Politicians can only deal with one issue at a time; their response is too fragmented and they don't understand the interdependence of issues. They are stuck in the conventional political agenda. Leaving everything to the market will not solve our problems.

The Club is now working on alternative ways to try to communicate with a broader range of people.

Politicians and journalists alone should not be the target; it is necessary to change the prevailing atmosphere in which politicians, journalists and voters all live. This will also include the recognition that there are no national solutions to transnational problems.

Frank personal opinions are more valuable than repeating old mistakes by burying them in silence.

We do not necessarily think our way through to a new way of living - we live our way through to a new way of thinking. New events change political reasoning – and events can change very quickly. It is therefore necessary to have alternative ideas readily available for when circumstances change. For example, no US presidential candidate could have been elected on the New Deal Programme in 1928. Four years later, with the Great Depression then underway, it was easier for Governor Roosevelt to advocate public works programmes etc. (indeed even the defeated President Hoover was more sympathetic to the notion by then).

Thus a challenge for The Club is to keep generating ideas and circulating them as widely as possible (including via partner organizations) for when they will be suddenly find an attentive audience.

It is interesting to note that even if politicians bounce obsessively from one headline to the next, the longer-term occupants of the corridors of power do take a long-term view. For example, the US military are paying close attention to the "peak oil" debate; politicians may not be listening to the warnings but some of the senior military certainly are.

✓ Limits to Growth

The warnings contained in the 1972 Report remain current.

If anything the situation has become even more dangerous: little decisive action has been taken in the last 40 years; the consumption of resources is now at an even higher pace; the financial system is even more fragile (for example, via the short-term speculative foreign exchange transactions and the use of tax havens beyond national jurisdiction); and the continued failure to develop better methods of measuring economic change (being able to measure “gross national product” was a fine start but we now need more sophisticated tools, such as for assessing the true value of natural resources).

Meanwhile, despite the warnings, international environmental diplomacy is stagnating (such as the negotiations over climate change).

There is now a need for societies to develop better resilience: a capacity to absorb shocks and still keep going. This means increasing “redundancy” (surplus capacity) within all programmes and so avoid the economic rationalism of “just in time” thinking, which leaves people and companies vulnerable to sudden disruptions.

✓ Conclusion

The Conference, then, covered many ideas.

All participants were most impressed with both the skill involved in organizing and running the Conference, and its capacity to provide so many new avenues of thought. Ideas are transformative agents. The Club of Rome remains on the cutting edge of thinking about the human predicament.

A continuing challenge for The Club of Rome is make sure it is known not as the “prophets of doom” - but as the “messengers of hope”.

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