

WHEN DISTANCE IS DEAD, VALUES MUST BE STRONGER

Presentation by Sandro Calvani¹,

UN Representative for Asia and the Pacific

at the Special 21st National Congress of the Acli
Brussels, 31 March 2000

Main Speaker: Professor Romano Prodi
President of European Commission

The United Nations looks at the large NGOs as protagonists of a new and lively phase of democracy and human development.

It is clear by now, even to those who at first pretended not to notice, that globalisation has not only brought into our homes the joy and hope of the world, but also its toil and suffering. Today the organised civil society has a clearer conscience, but also a stronger sense of responsibility.

Fifty-six years ago, when the founders of the United Nations wrote the first words of their Charter for a new association of peoples of the world, they began precisely with the recognition of what we should become: “We, the peoples of the world.” Therefore, not only the states, nations, governments or parliaments, but also the people themselves came out from the dark of World War II with a new sense of self.

The founders of the UN felt that invasions and ethnic and racial hatreds should stop when faced with a new judicial system that involved the peoples of the world. That hope was perhaps a bit premature, seeing how the last fifty years have progressed, but it was a step in the right direction, and today it is finally possible to achieve this goal.

Globalisation has arrived. It is not a political ideology, nor is it an economic theory, a hypothesis to discuss, embrace or resist. It is, rather, a form of human evolution. And like any other evolution, globalisation will proceed, whether we like it or not, and it permeates all human activities, sciences, and social as well as economic disciplines. It is therefore useless, and even ridiculous, to be for or against globalisation, as it is inevitable.

It is necessary, correct and beneficial to be attentive custodians, however. I would like to propose to you to reflect on two essential, parallel tracks of globalisation: they are the new freedoms and civil liberties on the one side, and innovation and necessary changes on the other.

Let us start with civil liberties, the economic liberalisation: are we really all that much freer? It seems to me that after civil liberties and human rights went through a series

¹ The speech was given in Italian.

of all possible “why not’s” – by getting rid of many confining taboos – a globalised and slightly confused world of today finally emerged, one that is now in need of courageous individuals who know how to say “no.” Simple no, clear and indisputable. No, for example, to the new global predators who take advantage of the dark side of globalisation by plundering the weakest environment, sex, age, generation, civilisation, and ethnic group. For these new pirates, nothing is sacred nor beyond their grasp. Furthermore, their list of wealth and goods to rob, both legal and illegal, is as long as the Yellow Pages, but the predators no longer make a distinction between these pages and the White Pages. They do not even distinguish goods from people. The nearly 10 million new slaves that are trafficked worldwide today are proof enough that the freedoms lost are far too great and widespread. Furthermore, the new freedoms gained cannot be the cause or the consolation.

In this area of new global political commitment, I foresee a leading role for the NGOs in becoming both architect and custodian of the freedoms and liberation that matter, and the rules to make them possible. A protagonist’s role, especially for the European civil society, seems to be one that can construct more serenely and efficiently a real dialogue between all civilisations. In the effort to recapture and give back freedom, to restore and reconstruct new responsibilities for citizens, you will certainly find the support of Europe and the rest of civil society. It is the total essence of a new humane Europe that was established in our own culture and civilisation, a Europe that can enjoy globalisation without serving it and give to all citizens of the world – even the smallest and the most forgotten – the right to be great individuals, like Socrates and Schumann. It is the promise that will make the global village happy, thus, preventing a global sacking. After all, the new global human security is either for everyone or it exists for no one.

There is then urgency for change and innovation, which overrides everything else. And unfortunately, this urgency often does not allow us enough time to understand or to decide on the best paths.

The biggest change in the world in the Year 2000 has been the “devaluation of distance.” One can say that distance does not amount to much anymore. In practice, in fact, distance does not exist anymore. It is dead. The global village has killed it. For example, a telephone call from London to New York costs about the same as a call from Rome to Milan. And in the former, they even speak the same language. A disaster with 300 dead in Uganda arrives on our TV set in real time, along with news of a house that has collapsed in Italy. Write this down in capital letters on your desks: distance is dead. And be very careful not to do yourselves harm. Those of you who do not believe it, try and maintain what they call “security distance,” complete with exclusive neighbourhoods, bullet-proof glass, electronic alarms, and “private property” signs on public park benches. But regardless, distance will have already darted off, bursting like a balloon.

Those who do not believe it, be they in business or social work, will soon fall headlong.

The second greatest change is access to knowledge and information. Given that distance is no longer a factor, everyone now has all the information available.

Everyday we receive an overdose of news and facts that are well seasoned with opinions and interpretations via the telephone, fax, television with 100 channels, e-mail, pager, cellular phone, newspaper, shiny advertising poster, radio, and Internet. Consequently, no one has time to talk to a neighbour, colleague, or family member. Distance tries to secretly revive itself with a new false identity, that is, “silence between real people about real things.”

The so-called free universal information, or *overdose* of information, leaves us often dazed and confused. I feel that it is mainly due to too much information, which threatens the concept of surprise and the capacity to have in mind a dream, which are necessary human elements for hope.

In order to recharge and accelerate communication, the young have discovered amphetamines, ecstasy, and all other types of cocktail drugs that work like firecrackers in the mind: splendid games, but in the head they leave only ashes behind. In any case, it is certain that there is a revolution in progress of the cognitive processes. For example, Gameboy, the \$99 toy, has more cybernetic power than the Cray Supercomputer that controlled the US Strategic Air Command 25 years ago. Also, after three years of growth, the shares of Cisco, Intel, and Microsoft on the American Stock Exchange are now worth more than those of Ford, General Motors or McDonald's. Why? It is simple: the various Cisco, Intel, and Microsoft produce services for the brain, while Ford, General Motors, and McDonald's give only a hand to our legs, stomach, and seats. Maybe for the first time in the history of man, who thinks more is worth more, today at an economic level and tomorrow at a social and political one.

These are examples, and who knows how many others you have already observed, that demonstrate how the only real great match is the one involving change and innovation. There are those who oppose it, and yet others who want to keep it, make the old ways lasting and strong, and consolidate them. Often the problem is not so much of accepting the new ideas, as it is of forgetting the old ones, getting them out of the way. So here are the young forces of NGOs who find themselves encouraging and managing the diversities – instead of being opposed to them, and thus, limiting their possibilities. The Acli is 100% service-oriented. As managers of services of solidarity, you must become producers of ideas and justice. I hope that you have, at all levels of this association, managers who tell you that those who do not produce ideas are merely standing in the way.

Those of you who think that you do not have the strength to create new ideas, to ride such a fast and untamed change in society, to choose what is right – even if it has never been seen before... Those... Those of you, who think that you cannot do it, will not be able to do it!

Being without courage, without mental strength, is a state of mind. If you think you are losers, then you will be. No one will give you, as individuals or as an association, the powers and strength that you will need. You must get them yourselves. Or else, you must be very convinced of already possessing them.

Of course it would be nice to always have leaders distribute these powers and know what it takes to be leaders. But in the absence of such leaders, it is enough that you

take on that role, that is, if you know how to be leaders without authority. The great innovators of the past century – Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Vaclav Havel, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – were all leaders without authority who were great provocateurs of innovation in history.

One of you told me this morning that here everything changes, but did I have an organisational model that would aid you in today's challenge and also work in complex situations?

Yes, I do. It is a model thoroughly Italian, European and international.

It is the “pizza”: our future organisation must be a bit like a pizza – the kind that is both well made, pleasing to the palate, easy for anybody to digest, and 100% cholesterol free.

First of all, as thin as possible.

Very hot, full of real heat and human enthusiasm; if at times it also burns us a little here and there, all the better.

Round. Nowadays, according to me, those who have in mind an organisational model in the shape of a pyramid – like a military hierarchy or a ministerial bureaucracy – should not only leave the Acli, but should also look again at a calendar to see what year we are in.

With lots of different things inside, everything that you like: mushrooms or ham, shrimp or eggs – but everything melted together so that each person, item or service loses itself a little in the other.

And who are the right leaders? Well, they are the pizza makers who prepare the pizza well. They mix all the ingredients, or better yet, the freshest ideas possible, together in front of everyone's eyes. And by doing so, they make the organisation fly high, spinning like a top, even if the bottom below seems cold like marble. Then they roll the pizza dough out as far as possible with almost non-existent borders.

They handle the pizza with great care, moving it with a big supporting tool into a piping hot oven with lots of firewood burning.

When the pizza turns out well, it should be ready in five minutes. It will sell extremely well, as everyone will like it. If the pizza is burned, it will only be served a bit late, as it just needs to be remade, then it will come out equally well. Besides, no one will notice that the pizza has arrived five minutes later. A pinch of “Ulivo” olive oil on top would not be such a bad idea, but that is merely according to my own personal taste.

You are also bridge builders, as I have already told you at Vallombrosa last year. Here I would add the seven P's of the essential pillars of today's bridges: to work on a feasible and innovative Plan, with Professionalism, being Provocateurs, building Partnerships, and carrying out Performance, that is, real results without having or

visiting “Palaces” but being close to and together with the “People.” In other words, it is what we now call “participating performance” towards organisational excellence.

And so here it remains always true, the life of the Acli is an adventure, an adventure with a sense of and capacity for risk, because if it is not this way in the world we live in today, then it would not even be considered “life.” The protagonists, in my opinion, as well as, I believe, according to the United Nations, are those who choose to be a conscious and responsible “person” in an NGO, in the Acli of the Year 2000. And so you are, or at least, I sincerely hope with all my heart that every one of you will be.