

## ASIAN FORUM on SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

TOKYO Conference 7-10 November 2009

SPEECH by Edith SIZOO <sup>1</sup> at Final Plenary

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon

Sincere thanks to the organizers of this conference to give me the opportunity to address the participants of this meeting.

Being the last speaker in a long range of interesting preceding ones is not that easy, but it has the advantage of having had the privilege to listen not only to all that has been said, but also to what has not been said.

Perhaps, at the end of two days of detailed information on fascinating and very concrete experiences related to Solidarity Economy (hereafter SE), it is good to go back to some basic questions. Maybe one aspect in the analyses that have been provided about the current situation in the world, has not been highlighted very clearly.

SE has been presented as a reaction to the dominant economic systems, as one way of realising the slogan “another world is possible”, as an alternative. If the word “alternative” is meant to imply that the dominant economic system should be replaced by more socially equitable forms of economy, I’m afraid that there is a long way to go before this dream comes true. A too long way.

Thus the question is : what to do between today and the moment our dream comes true ?

There is no need to stress here that our world is facing unprecedented crises : the ecological crisis, the financial and economic crisis, political crises in the sense of good leadership and good governance, social and cultural crises.

The phenomenon of globalisation implies that never before have human beings had such far-reaching impacts on one another’s social, political, economic and cultural lives. And never before have the challenges to face the economic and ecological consequences of these crises been so enormous. And never before have human beings possessed so much knowledge and so much power to change their environments.

And still, in spite of all the available knowledge and all the new possibilities that have opened up, the responses to these crises have been insufficient :

- the role of States is undermined by the pervasive power of international markets
- scientific institutions are pursuing specialised interests
- international institutions have failed to turn the rising tide of inequality

---

<sup>1</sup> Edith SIZOO is International Coordinator for the initiative to promote a CHARTER OF HUMAN RESPONSIBILITIES <http://www.charter-human-responsibilities.net>

- and religious institutions have *not* adequately fulfilled their role of providing adequate answers to the new challenges.

Therefore, the key-question to be asked is : why are these responses insufficient ?

There is, of course, not one answer to this question. But among the many aspects of this complicated issue, I would like to propose for reflection that underlying all these crises and insufficient answers, there is another fundamental crisis : a crisis in values, or more precisely : a crisis, a breaking down of a common ethical basis which helps people to make choices.

One of the characteristics of modernity and of so-called post-modern thinking is fragmentation.

Fragmentation

- of the social fabric (e.g. within families : divorces)
- within the sciences (e.g. : far-going specialisations within the medical sciences, at least the Western ones, where each part of the human body is given specialised attention, but the complex whole is not taken into consideration)
- fragmentation in the workplace, factories, offices where one is given tasks of which one often does not quite know how it serves the overall objective of the company.

These and other forms of fragmentation are less visible, but very much present as well in the underlying ethical foundations of our societies.

Traditional values of respect, consideration for others, hospitality, compassion, peace and harmony are usually still practiced at family level, but less and less predominant at the workplace, in politics, in the business world, not to speak of the financial world...

I remember a debate that took place in the Parliament of my country, the Netherlands, some years ago. The question was whether a law should be made to control the application of advanced technologies in genetic engineering. Should we at the end of the day allow human beings to be cloned ? In the course of the debate the differences between the 28 political parties seemed to fade away as every single parliamentarian was facing dilemmas between moral consciousness on the one hand and economic profit or freedom of scientific research on the other. Towards two o'clock in the morning, the chairman stood up and said that there was no use continuing the debate. The real problem is, he said, that this debate shows that in this country we do not have anymore a common ethical base of values that tell us "so far and no further". We are not able to put ethical limits to what technologies may make possible.

Loss of values means loss of a sense of self-limitation. Is there an answer to this loss ? Is there still a value common to all humankind, to all human beings from street cleaners to villagers to teachers to business people, fair traders, social activists, scientists, journalists, politicians, religious

and social leaders ? One value of which no one can say : that's good for others but not for me ?  
That's good for family-life but not for the workplace ?

Or, the other way around ; is there one value common to all human beings that is not applied sufficiently so that all current crises in the world are so far from being solved ?

It took two World Wars in the last century before the Nations of the world united at the General Assembly of the United Nations to create and sign two agreements that can be considered the two pillars of international life : the UN Charter for Peace and Development, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Peace...development... rights... We all know that these important objectives have not been reached. But at least... they constitute international reference points, notions one can refer to when they are not observed or violated.

The problem in the present crises the world is facing - ecological, economic, financial and social- is that there is not a commonly worldwide accepted international reference point that can be pointed at.

Is the underlying problem not the lack of clarity about the age old idea of Responsibility in modern times ? Confusion about what "responsibility" implies ? for each and all of us ? for professional groups, social groups, politicians, scientists, the media, the world of money and profit-making ?

Nowadays there is a lot of political discourse about "responsibility". The US President, Barack Obama, said in one of his speeches with regard to the financial crisis : "We have to transform a culture of greed into a culture of responsibility".

He is perfectly right. But the problem with political discourses is that subsequently no specification is given of who is responsible for what ? and who has to account for what to whom ? For instance : for what are multi-nationals responsible ? for the common good ? and to whom do they account for their choices of products ? good or bad for the climate, health of people ? good or bad for local village industries ? To whom do banking traders account for the way they are trading with the money of others ? To whom do scientists account for the potential consequences of the things that are invented thanks to new technological discoveries ?

Would it not be useful for all activists in Solidarity Economy to be able to refer to an internationally recognised reference point, a Charter or a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, a "third pillar" of international life ? And would it not be useful to have oneself a checkpoint with regard to one's personal and professional responsibilities ?

The new challenges humankind is facing in the XXIst century are urgently calling for such an agreement, certainly not to replace the two existing ones but as an additional reference point, to re-enforce the agreements for Peace, Development and Rights.

In this framework of thinking an initiative was taken in 2001 at the World Assembly of Citizens, organised by the Foundation Charles Léopold Mayer, to start up a process to promote the idea of such a Charter. A text was proposed as a working document, a pretext for dialogue, a text in evolution. It was translated in some 25 languages, each of them adapted to the cultural context concerned. An International facilitation Committee was formed with coordinators in 15 countries around the world. They formed national committees and submitted the Charter of Human Responsibilities for discussion to all kinds of professional and social groups. The ten principles of the Charter were thus discussed by journalists, lawyers, scientists, social activists and even schoolchildren. Sectoral and professional charters were created based on the principles of the Charter of Human Responsibilities.

The process we have thus started up is essentially a bottom-up approach, but does not exclude in any way the world of politics. It is felt though that we need to work towards creating cultures of responsibility in all spheres of life and work. We need to create the groundswell, that is to say massive support from civil society to oblige political, economic and social leaders to accept that an internationally recognised Charter or Declaration of Human Responsibilities is unavoidable.

I would like to end by saying that the idea of “Responsibility” is a unifying concept, because it applies to each and all human beings at all levels of activity. The French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas said : “I am responsible because you are”. It is true that “responsibility” is by definition a relational notion. But not only between human beings. In Asian traditions as well as in indigenous worldviews there are much deeper and larger conceptions of “responsibility”. There one finds the idea of “the woven universe”, the idea that all living beings and forms of life are interconnected and that the human being is just one among them, and... not superior to other forms of life. This implies that responsibility is evident. In indigenous languages there is not even an adequate word for the western notion of responsibility, because it is too evident to be named. The deepest reason why Responsibility is a key-value, is found in Asian wisdom which teaches to be aware of the wholeness of the universe. It is summed up by the following sentence :

“You are like a drop in the ocean.

The ocean is nothing without the drop. The drop is nothing without the ocean.

You are the ocean. The ocean is you”.

May this wisdom guide us in our search for a responsible world.

\*\*\*\*\*