



ECO-PRODUCTIVE CITIES

A three-day Seminar, 5 to 7 September, 2013 at Auroville

Summary of Panel Discussion

How to make cities more sustainable?

On the final morning there was a panel discussion involving Ralf Otterpohl, Chairman of Zeri, Germany; Ashok Lall, Principal of Ashok Architects, Delhi; Professor S. A. Abbasi, Head of the centre for Pollution Control and Environmental Engineering, Pondicherry University; and Suhasini, an Aurovilian architect. The panel discussion was moderated by Alan. Here are some highlights.

Is it really feasible to make our cities sustainable?

Ashok; Cities have formed themselves through millennia, and I think cities will be there in the future. There is something about the way we relate to one another and work together in cities which clearly contributes to our collective well-being. However, there is empirical evidence that when cities grow very fast or when they grow bigger than a certain size then the collective well-being quotient begins to decline. So I think if we address the issue of size and scale and find the optimal point, we would have sustainable cities.

Abbasi: About 200 years ago, the population of the Earth began to over-consume. Today the Earth today is like an obese person who is suffering from aching knee joints, diabetes and heart problems. In this room we have lots of Good Samaritans who want to help, who want to offer liposuction to make it less flabby, but we're not understanding that the world is over-consuming, and until that over-consumption is shut off any amount of treatment is ultimately an exercise in futility.

What are the key changes that would have to take place for cities to become more sustainable?

Suhasini: We will be obliged to find solutions for the various systems that have to function in cities – energy and food production, waste treatment etc – within the cities themselves if they are to be sustainable. We are at the end of the era when cities could import natural resources from outside and export their waste.

Also, the way we look at sustainable development at present will not bring sustainable development, because we want technologies that will enable us not to have to make changes in our lives. For me, the last 200 years of development has been civilization on steroids. But what we are talking about in most of these types of conference is not how to change how we live, but how to put civilization on more natural, organic steroids! This is not what I understand by sustainability.

Ralf: We need a different type of city planning paradigm. The normal paradigm looks at squeezing more and more people into the available space. But this does not make sense. We need cities which can grow at least 20%-30% of the food that city needs, and that can collect and recycle enough water so that basic needs are covered.

The buildings should be a maximum of four or five stories high because if you go higher the living experience is not improved and you make it into more of a 'cage' environment. If lower buildings have roof gardens and are built around gardens which grow food, they are more sustainable. Ultimately, however, the city alone cannot sustain itself: there also need to be linkages with local rural communities which will provide food etc.

Ashok: One of the most crucial things that has to happen is an adequate distribution of wealth and knowledge amongst populations, so that their DNA evolves to regulate itself in terms of population size. Secondly, we have to become aware of our lifestyles and our basic needs, and the relationship of these to environmental balance. If we can devise tools and techniques which will make us instinctively aware of the consequences of what we're doing, a feedback loop, then we can develop a more sustainable mode of living. This is the single most crucial thing that we should achieve if we are to have a sustainable future.

Abassi: The world has to disabuse itself of one very great myth, the myth that science and technology can solve all our problems. We need to understand that science and technology have limits, and that the world is governed by certain immutable laws of thermodynamics. So we cannot continue to overheat the planet. One of the biggest blunders the world is making is to say we should switch to green energy to mitigate global warming and maintain our present lifestyle. It's a load of nonsense because this way we will continue to over-consume.

Suhasini: We need to change the way we perceive ourselves and our value on this planet. We value ourselves above every other ecosystem and this makes it impossible for us to work within the limits of the environment.

How are these key changes going to happen?

Ashok: I think the empirical evidence is clear that the top-down approach is heavily loaded against positive outcomes. The bottom-up approach I think is more hopeful, and what we are seeing in this room and elsewhere in such gatherings is the beginnings of the bottom-up approach. So I think the key to change is small elements, small forces, leveraging and multiplying their efforts through making connections with others.

Does the world have time for a bottom-up approach?

Time is short, but equally the rate at which communication can grow and knowledge spread over the next 30 or 40 years can be equally quick if we find the right tools.

Ralf: The top-down approach is already happening – we are suffering a dictatorship of the multinational corporations which is making us into stupid consumers. Bottom-up is the only approach. We must make interesting videos about what we have been talking here and translate them into many languages. Then we need to link this to real action so people are encouraged to go out and grow their own food and strengthen community.

Suhasini: Today's conference, like many other conferences, talks about resources – land, water, food, air quality – but there is one resource which we never seem to integrate in sustainable development, and that is time. I find that lots of human action today is not consciously directed to destruction of the planet, but we act unwisely because we don't have the time to reflect upon the outcome of our actions. Unless we also integrate time into our factors of change we are never going to be able to find the time to change.

Ralf: It is very important to understand why people behave in the way they do. Very often, greedy or power-driven behaviour can be traced back to something that happened in someone's childhood. Perhaps these people lost their feeling of safety when young, so now they build walls around themselves using money or power. When we discover what is driving us and what is the biggest blockage that we have, then we can work upon releasing it. This work of personal change and development is also crucial if we are to have positive outcomes.

Nergez (Participant): Mother said that if you want to change others, you should change yourself first.

Abassi: We are devaluing the environmental cost of destruction. The cost of making my notebook and of disposing of it is much higher than what I have paid for it. Almost everything we buy has its environmental cost subsidized. Regarding the big corporations, it is not that they are bad guys and we are good guys. If I was part of a large corporation, I might be thinking and acting in the same way as they do. The problem lies not with people but with our paradigm of development.

Richard (Participant): We've heard a lot in the last few days about small to medium-scale interventions. These are great, but I think what is really needed is a step change. We need to find a receptive municipality which is prepared to make a very big difference to their city, to make it into a demonstration city for sustainable living. We need an example on this kind of scale to show people that it can be done.

Participant: I think there are three levels of action we should engage in. The first is educating and generating more awareness about these things, the second is to build successful prototypes that can be replicated, and the third is political action. We need a civil society movement that will demand fundamental changes.

Toine: There are six ways things change. One, the best, is through conviction. The others are compulsion; contagion, (through example); legislation; innovation; and communication. I think each one of us here can pick out one or two of these to concentrate our efforts upon.

Finally, of course, the outcome is in the hands of forces much greater than us, but we can also do our part.

Edited by Alan Herbert