



The 2030 Agenda and the Construction of a More Resilient Europe in a Globalised World

Reflections from a SD council perspective

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Nature is very resilient if we "just stop actively destroying it", President Obama said on September 15. Eight times, the term 'resilient' happens to pop up in the language of the SDGs. Resilience is used as an attribute to sustainable and modern energy services, sustainable transport systems, and quality and resilient infrastructure, as well as others.

No doubt, asking for more resilient policies is a crucial element that, with others, is meant to contribute to achieving sustainable development goals. The opposite of resilience is vulnerability. And, as our world is increasingly vulnerable, more resilience would never be amiss.

I

The mainstream definition, as suggested by wikipedia, is different, though: resilience as the ability of a system to cope with change. This concept is certainly helpful when we have to deal with the aftermath of unforeseeable and unavoidable impact from earthquakes or other natural disasters. But otherwise it can be used in a way that is sustainability-adverse; and I would like to point that out.

The academic framing of sustainability developed some very different and partly competing concepts, such as planetary boundaries, the ecological footprint, the Gaia hypothesis, and the TEEB approach. From Thailand, we hear about sufficiency thinking. Bhutan favours the concept of a gross national happiness product. Paul Crutzen introduced the idea of the Anthropocene. In the Anthropocene, he suggested that humans had become the main agents of change to the Earth system, and were starting to overwhelm the Earth's buffering capacity.

Resilience is another of those concepts. It seems to suggest that our former living conditions used to be stable, and that they are now becoming unstable. I think, in particular in terms of the fiscal and economic crisis since 2008, not what is seen as “crisis” is the real disaster. It rather is the regular state of play that basically is the crisis itself. Putting it like this raises major governance questions in terms of inequality, hunger, injustice, miseducation, conceptual misinvoicing, and corruption. That needs to be kept in mind.

Sustainability stands for change; resilience stands for bouncing back to a previous state after a change impact. Change, in the context of resilience programs, is perceived as an unwanted pressure that comes from the outside, something negative and not explicitly wanted, or something that happens unwillingly.

But change, in the sense of sustainable development strategies, might imply something positive and some aspirational goal. Policies such as sustainability strategies, decarbonisation, the circular economy, or anti-corruption, social inclusiveness, and transparency in supply chains, necessitate and imply bold changes and sometimes even disruptive policies.

Such policies do not want the system to bounce back into its previous state.

II

At this point, I would like to tell you the story of Aaron Antonovsky. He was born in the United States in 1923. He emigrated to Israel in 1960 and held positions at the Israeli Institute for Applied Social Research and in the Department of Medical Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He dedicated his academic work to social class differences in morbidity and mortality.

Antonovsky found that 29% of women who had survived Nazi concentration camps had positive emotional health. This means that 29% of the survivors were *not* emotionally impaired by the physical and psychological terror and stress. That is a dramatic finding. It prompted Antonovsky to think about resilience and to ask questions such as:

Why do some people stay healthy and others do not, regardless of severe hardships and adversities? What is the origin of health? What creates health? Who are the people staying well?

He then developed a theory of health, illness and coping, which he termed salutogenesis. Salutogenesis is the opposite of pathogenesis. The latter is about curing, emergency response, and providing help. The former is about producing health and precaution.

Why is this so important for us? It teaches us the lesson that we need to understand the differences within the system before we understand “the system” as such and as a complex entity. There is reason to believe that resilient forces are within what we see as an entity, and, as long as we only see the entity, we might stay on a superficial level and might not respect the real power of change. Within a system, the ability of members of the system varies a lot in terms of coping with stress. Basically, this is what makes a big difference.

But, all too often, we think that we can address the resilience of a system – be it the EU, be it politics, or be it climate change. However, as with the example of holocaust survivors, it is the different robust reaction that we need to understand, and we need to use this knowledge for salutogenesis, that is in our words: for a sustainable development.

III

What is the Council's perspective on this?

Councils for sustainable development are multi-stakeholder councils. Similar bodies may well work under slightly different names. In the case of the German RNE, the top of national government echelon appoints members from the private and public sectors, including from academia, on the basis of their personal dedication and expertise. Undoubtedly, a robust budget and professional staff helps to pursue an independent mandate.

From the times of the World Summit on Environment and Development held in Johannesburg 2002, some European Member states' councils have been working together and regularly sharing their experiences. We addressed the European level on numerous occasions. We have commented on the Gothenburg Strategy. Our meetings in Kinsale, Warsaw, Dubrovnik and Bordeaux have produced great proposals for the EU level on how to proceed with sustainable development. We were deeply unsatisfied with the current policies. The EU case for sustainability is in a non-resilient position.

Europe's economic perspective needs to catch up with ecology and social aspects. It needs a new orientation that would allow for resilience and deliver on the universal Global Sustainable Development Goals.

- Focusing on the world market and global competitiveness alone does not do the trick. It is important, for some regions, but not specifically for the whole of Europe. Economic strategies must also allow for regional aspects to focus on regional internal markets, tourism and agriculture. This is needed for social sustainability and inclusiveness, and it offers bold chances for green economy approaches.
- Arenas of competence with a major relevance for the future, such as industry4.0, platform capitalism, high speed trains, and common R&D policies, need an additional financial framework. A tax on financial transactions would do the trick.
- Europe needs a legal framework that would define a basic level (or basic levels) for social standards, e.g. minimum wages, social welfare, and work force mobility throughout Europe. The ECB zero interest policy is not resilient.

RNE works in a modality as an advisor, advocate and agent in independent projects. A couple of our activities are clearly aimed at the European level. They are open to European partners. In a way, they are designed as shareware projects.

- Empowerment

The European Sustainable Development Week is an open platform that invites grassroots and initiatives to post their actions and activities during the ESDW (first week in June). The ESDW is jointly organised by a core group of European Member states, namely France, Austria and Germany. More than 4000 posts in 2016 are a clear sign to Brussels that sustainable development is for real. It gives the signal that the exhausting academic reasoning about terminology is long gone. Now, what counts is creativity, innovation, empowerment and credibility, all of which the European policy machine should catch up with.

- Addressing the private sector

RNE is strongly committed to advancing the case of sustainable business conduct. The Sustainability Code is a transparency standard designed to allow for enterprises to report on non-financial performance in accordance with the legal requirements of the EU Directive on Corporate Social Responsibility. Again, the Code – in terms of service tools and databanks - is shareware. The case of Greece is excellent proof of this.

- German Sustainability Award

The prestigious German Sustainability Award acknowledges best practice of enterprises and cities as well as in terms of sustainable building and research. In a new way, and with a spirit of encouragement and aspiration, it brings together people from the public and private sector, urban politics and housing, academia and science. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon only recently received the Honorary Award for his outstanding personal contribution to the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. The Award is an important element in our ongoing efforts to establish a culture.

- Governance

In general, the governance suited to support transformative decisions towards sustainable development still waits to be fully developed and rolled out. RNE is supportive of EESC's efforts to establish a European Sustainable Development Forum. Without doubt, comprehensive and integrative sustainability thinking needs a stronger voice in Europe. Generally speaking, Europe would benefit from a structured and informed dialogue on what governance features for sustainability work on the national level and how they could be extrapolated in a subsidiarity approach.

The world at large is less violent than ever before, but is also riddled with old divisions and fresh hatreds. The world is, in general, more aware of environmental breakdown than ever before, but its tendency to overshooting the ecological carrying capacity is not mended. The world is more prosperous today than ever before, but it is increasingly divided by inequality. That is also true for Europe. Here, the frustrations people feel is for real. Inequality and dislocation as well as the resulting social division cannot be ignored.

There are now 17 Sustainable Development Goals on which we have to deliver. We, meaning we all. We all are invited – and challenged – to contribute our enduring commitment to a set of values: no matter who we are, where we come from, what our last names are, what faith we practice. Here, we are all in.

In a way, we will see ourselves in each other, and that will make our lives richer.

It is not charity. It is an investment in our future prosperity.

It is about fanning the flames of defining sustainability as a living concept.

We must never forget that it can be as simple as this: Nature is very resilient if we just stop actively destroying it.