

What is a foundation? A non-governmental organisation that, in principle, has two characteristics stemming from its funding - that is, the income from property bequeathed by the founder. The characteristics are independence from major powers - governments, companies, churches, trade unions- and the ability to act in the long term. These are two important qualities in a world dominated by sectional interests and short-term thinking. To them may be added two other characteristics: foundations are usually modest structures; and their activities are not tied to a particular geographical area.

Because they are modest structures, with less inertia than the major institutions - governments, universities or companies- foundations, in principle, are better able to focus on issues of the world of tomorrow. Our planet is being shaped by scientific, technological, cultural, economic and political forces that are changing very rapidly, while major institutions and attitudes change slowly. We tend to face the problems of tomorrow with the attitudes of yesterday and the institutions of the day before. And so a duty falls on independent organizations such as foundations, which have less inertia than the major public - and private- sector structures: they must contribute actively to sketching the prospects for tomorrow, and (instead of the compartmentalized approach of institutions) they must work toward a practical, global vision of the future.

Among the remarkable changes of our time is that occurring in the relationship between human-kind and the environment. In every age, people have transformed their surroundings - sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. Until the Second World War, however, these transformations were local in nature, even though at times they stretched over vast areas. In the 50 years since then, the impact of human activities on the biosphere has grown considerably, and this quantitative growth has led to a really qualitative change. Today, the cumulative action of humans affects the overall balance of the biosphere. Humans therefore bear a new responsibility every bit as great as their power: to exercise respect and caution in maintaining the balance that they are able to destroy.

At the same time, however, it would be foolish to suppose that environmental issues can be dealt with in isolation. Instead, all our development models and our vision of the world are involved. Environmental problems have their source in Western development and the model it has imposed; thus no solution can be found unless we consider all the crises arising from this model. The proof can be seen in the limited (to say the least) outcome of the Rio Earth Summit, despite the extraordinary media hype surrounding it. Why should China Asia and the developing world in general agree to curb their growth if the industrialized nations confine themselves (as they are now doing) to very timid measures, preferring to put the emphasis on repairing local environmental damage rather than getting to the bottom of the problem?

At the end of the 20th century, the world faces three major interlinked crises: a crisis in the relationship between humans and their environment; a crisis in the relationships between humans themselves, seen in widening social divisions amounting to apartheid; and a crisis in the relationships between societies. These crises are rooted in modern Western thought, which has turned the market and science (those marvellous tools invented to serve humanity) into ends in themselves to which everyone is required to submit, regardless of the consequences. Faced with these crises, humanity seems to feel powerless: the forms of government it has invented over the centuries - with the democratic nation-state being the most developed form - are no longer capable of dealing with the new challenges before it. The most striking example is provided by the big world conferences mounted in the closing years of this century - meetings whose futility is clearer every day. These are conferences between states, controlled by diplomats, restricted by a narrow vision of national interests, accompanied by parallel but separate conferences for scientists, business and voluntary groups. These huge gatherings, preceded by so much hope, are followed by as much disillusionment.

Of course, the outcome is not always negligible. The big conferences promote greater awareness and facilitate the creation of a vague but real feeling of world citizenship; they accelerate the emergence of new social players - for instance, local communities during the Istanbul conference;

and they impose time constraints that help certain issues to crystallize and principles to be enunciated. But these positive effects are not enough to solve the problems, and in the end they simply show that the global community is in a management crisis: the world no longer conforms to what the founding fathers of the UN system had in mind.

This powerlessness places on us an urgent duty to be ambitious. Are non-governmental organizations - in particular environmental groups (ENGOS)- capable of this ambition? I sincerely doubt it. They are among the social players that have undergone the most rapid growth in recent decades, for nearly the same reasons that have led to the growth of multinational corporations. But their scope of action often remains very narrow, and their fields of concern very limited. The largest of these groups puts their energy into campaigns, fanning the ardour of their activists by choosing targets that are both spectacular and accessible. But in so doing, they are following the very marketing approach of private enterprise, and eventually they even adopt the same behaviours. Indeed it's possible to sell indignation exactly as one might sell bars of soap. Further, the domination of some major international ENGOs (whether their members are environmental activists or scientists) has effects very similar to the market domination of some businesses. Anglo-Saxon priorities, attitudes and culture are heavily over-represented. It is pointless to denounce this situation. We must give credit to these organizations' ability to operate effectively, to their media savvy, their consummate showbiz sense, their skilled use of communications techniques. But we must guard against the illusion that a worldwide dialogue is taking place between international organizations and ENGOS; in fact, the dialogue is confined to the Anglo-Saxon world.

What we must do is something much more profound and more ambitious. In the coming decades, we must initiate a dialogue between different cultures and different circles; the aim is to introduce, in as co-ordinated a manner as possible, a gamut of changes in values, science, technology, law, economics, trade, government and biosphere management, so as to start managing our planet in a way that includes different cultures as partners. And independent organizations such as foundations will bear responsibility for taking the initiative. It is up to them to act - not because they are better than other players, but because they are hampered by fewer constraints.

But are they really acting? Not all that much, and we must ask why. From my conversations with foundation directors, I have discerned several types of obstacle:

- Many foundations were set up by companies or rich people, and have a board with members drawn from the economic and political establishment. These people are little inclined to question in a fundamental way the privileges of the elite.
- Many foundations see themselves as alternatives to government action in their own countries rather than as organisations with an international mission. Often their founders regard themselves as citizens of their city or country rather than citizens of the world.
- There is sometimes a profound gap between the foundation board, which is ultimately responsible for the policy followed, and the permanent staff, whose duty it is to propose to the board what activities should receive funding. The gap leads the board to prefer types of action that lend themselves easily to external assessment. This is why many foundations concentrate on relatively limited projects that are easy to define and to cost. They thereby rule out acting on any proposal that is difficult to evaluate because of its geographical or thematic scope.

Unless they overcome these obstacles, foundations will not be fulfilling their historic duty at the end of this century. As I see it, they can remove the obstacles by meeting two conditions:

- Foundations must make use of their assets: independence and longevity. They must have the daring to undertake long-term ventures, and they must eschew simplistic assessments of their actions. "Make the difference," people from American foundations have said to me. Yes, but to be able to measure the difference one has made, the aim of the action must be quite limited. I believe that a foundation must seek to evaluate the relevance of its activities;

that is, it must try to learn whether its actions really address true priorities of humanity, whether they make best use of the assets of the foundation, and whether past experience shows that the foundation is as well equipped as possible to meet the challenges rather than simply to assess the impact of an isolated action.

- Foundations must break free from the role to which they are sometimes confined, between public- and private- sector action. The question is not really whether private charity is less or more effective than public charity, or whether social cohesion is better advanced by taxation or by tax exemptions, enabling foundations to act in place, and instead of, government. The question is much more important and much more serious: the traditional ways of governing our societies have been overtaken by new challenges, and we must invent other ways.

This is why the Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme (FPH), which I head, supported a collective re-examination lasting from 1986 to 1993. The findings led FPH, starting in 1994, to support the creation and development of the *Alliance pour un monde responsable et solidaire*. In the 18th century, the West embarked on a remarkable transformation that shattered the old institutional frameworks of our societies. The emergence of the constitutional monarchy in Britain, the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars that swept through Europe - these events were all milestones in the transformation. In France itself, the summoning of the Estates General at Versailles in the spring of 1789 gave the signal for a révolution, the effects of which were felt throughout Europe. Most cultures have established their own negotiating procedures for times of crisis. The meeting of the Estates General was significant because it represented a break with regional meetings, and it opened the way for confrontation between the interests of the different classes that then made up society: the aristocracy, the clergy and the Third Estate. Through this confrontation and the alliances suddenly forged by a part of the aristocracy and clergy with the rapidly rising Third Estate, the discrepancy was revealed between society's mode of government and its real state.

A resemblance links that historic meeting in 1789 with the Alliance pour un monde responsable et solidaire and the gamble on which this venture is based. Throughout the world, institutional structures, modes of political representation and forms of negotiation lag far behind the reality. We must lay aside the view-points of individual countries, cultures and regions in order to solve the crises of today and discern the prospects for tomorrow. We must put into place a form of dialogue between economic, social, religious, cultural and scientific interests, because until now our forms of political representation have blocked communication between these different players on anything more than the national level. Organizations grouping farmers, fishermen, women and young professionals must be able to forin at the regional and global levels; they must be able to participate, on equal footing with others, in the world now coming into existence. Lastly, we must have the daring, together, to name and identify the principal changes required in the coming decades, and to come up with new proposals for making these changes.

The emerging European Union - the true, bold centre of Europe's future institutions- often says that, in coming years, government will be procedural: what matters is not so much who makes the decisions as the way in which the dialogue process is organized between the different social players. The Alliance pour un monde responsable et solidaire seeks to introduce this type of government by proposing a process organized around three paths or points of entry: 1) local groups whose work starts from the priorities and culture proper to each setting; 2) collèges bringing together, on a worldwide basis, people in the same circumstances (position in society or field of activity) - for instance, women, youth, farmers, business leaders, religious leaders, local authorities, artists, parliamentarians, labourers and scientists; and 3) international workshops on particular themes to draft specific proposals in areas where change is required in the coming decades.

The point of departure for this venture is the Platform for a Responsible and United World, drawn up in 1993 after international discussions. This year the number of countries that have signed

the Platform reached 100. An essential stage will be preparing and holding an assembly of citizens of the earth. The exact nature of this event is gradually taking shape; it will be held in 1999-2000, with each participant representing a place or view-point, and each bringing proposals arising from group efforts. It will be not merely a gathering, but a true assembly taking the time to consider different viewpoints, where each participant is permanently linked with the people she or he represents. Beyond its actual meeting, the assembly will give physical expression to an emerging world structure and nascent global awareness.

We believe in this realistic ambition quite simply because it can meet the challenges. What is realism except the capacity to subordinate one's own actions to the external reality? In contrast idealists seek to reduce the world to their own perceptions and their own scale. This, then, is the ambitions undertaking that we are calling on foundations and non-governmental organisations to support with us.

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