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**The Challenges of Sustainability
Seven Critical Remarks**

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The topic I was invited to comment is a large, complex and strategic one.

The vital tasks of the sustainability building process can be regarded both as a symbol and a synonym of the crucial challenges the European Union (EU) is about to meet in the coming years.

I would like to summarize the central core of that challenge-constellation in seven brief critical remarks.

The political content of those vital tasks need in order to become effectual a much larger time span than the mere six months of a national presidency of the EU. Nevertheless the role of the Austrian Presidency should help in driving the Union inside the narrow lane of the sustainability strategy dealt in the following critical remarks. Those remarks may be deemed as theoretical guiding lines and simultaneously as urgent tasks to be assumed by the several political actors within the European Union (EU) political process:

- The EU institutional structure itself.
- The governments of the EU member States.
- The EU citizenry organized by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other types of civil society networks.

To make a long story short I will emphasize above all the environmental policy features of sustainability.

Nevertheless, we should not put aside the deep implications of environmental problems with all the other major areas of EU public policies, from job creation to security and foreign policy matters.

§1. Sustainability is still a rather wide, open and ambiguous concept, which requires further scientific research in order to obtain a more precise and consensual meaning to it.

To fulfill that clarification purpose we need to join common efforts from social and natural sciences and scientists.

We have to interact theoretical explanatory propositions with richer and accurate empirical data.

In spite of all the still prevailing shortcomings, we have to acknowledge that some positive steps were accomplished since the generalization of the 'sustainable development' concept, subsequently the release of the Brundtland Report, eleven years ago.

A great deal of progress was made in the realm of ecological economics. New doctrines are arising directed to avoid blindness concerning the environmental negative externalities of our current productive and tax systems.

After the historical and founding work of Arthur Cecil Pigou (1877-1959), "The Economics of Welfare" (1920), we have to underline not only the individual achievements of brilliant minds like Kenneth Boulding, Garrett Hardin, E.F. Schumacher, Herman Daly, among many others, but also the collective endeavor of thousands of scholars working inside the guiding lines of the International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) (1).

The 'greening' of the economic calculation, the evaluation of environmental negative externalities induced by economic activities and other common human daily actions, like traveling, are reaching not only the national economies but also the private sector and even some of the transnational corporations. The risk of negative environmental impacts is now an important gauge procedure for the giving of loans by such bodies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

On the other side, the empirical data we are collecting seem to encourage the possibility of the breakthrough of some new and hopeful trends.

Some of the EU and OECD countries were already able to break the classical linkage between the growth of their GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and the continual rise of primary energy consumption.

For the first time in history, in the late 80's and thereafter, countries like Japan and Germany knew increase in their national wealth while decreasing the energy and raw materials intensity for each unit of their GDP (2).

§2. My second remark addresses the compelling need of a profound shift in the EU regulatory paradigm.

The EU should follow in the political path the ethical advice from Henry David Thoreau, disclosed more than a century ago: "Simplify, simplify.." (3).

The most wise choice should allow the replacement of the current fragmentary, step-by-step EU regulatory pattern by an audacious and issue-oriented strategic vision.

The positive efforts already made regarding the establishing of a framework directive for EU action in the field of water policy could show us the path to the deepening and the 'greening' of the Amsterdam Treaty interpretation and implementation mechanisms.

I refuse to consider as an utopia the perspective that some day in the near future the EU will be able to overcome the still prevailing resistance that separate us from the drafting of a truly 'EU Environment protection and sustainable common act or bill'.

§3. In my third critical remark I want to point out that sustainability strategies within the EU will largely benefit from the extension to other member States of the several instruments already in use and therefore submitted to the proof of experience and success by the different environmental policies of some of the EU member States.

In saying this I have in mind not only the classical regulatory and command-and-control methods but also two other categories of instruments:

- Economic instruments, like taxes, charges, bounties, tradeable permits, and so on.
- Self-regulation instruments, which may constitute a more flexible, less expensive, and less bureaucratic answer to problems in which non-State actors can play a major role (4).

§4. In the fourth critical remark I will stress that sustainability at EU level also means the urgent necessity of linking the economic and social cohesion targets -- so important for countries like Portugal and Ireland as also for the new comers from Eastern Europe -- with sound, clear and realistic environmental criteria regarding the access to structural funding.

A weak environmental public policy is an ugly sign of underdevelopment and a threat to the quality of life and to public health. The taxes paid by the citizens all over Europe should be a catalytic factor in the shift towards more efficient environmental public policies, and not a fuel to its onerous perpetuation.

§5. In my fifth critical remark I would like to underline that in order to reach a more sustainable direction for EU global policies we must enhance our own capacity building, promoting at the same time a better government and new creative forms of multinational governance.

A stronger emphasis in issue-oriented policies designed to an European scale is dramatically needed, both among EU governments as well among civil society organizations and networks.

Unfortunately many European citizens with political leadership responsibilities are still under the heavy burden of national bias and ideological inertia which prevent them from a clear sight of what is really at stake in the contemporary sustainability debate.

§6. If the EU wants to tackle the challenge of sustainability in the beginning of the 21st century it implies the inclusion of the surrounding European and non-European countries in a larger partnership for sustainable development.

The permanent menace waiting inside the Ukrainian Chernobyl nuclear power plant is just a metaphor of our deeply interdependent Union. Nowadays International cooperation in the field of environmental security it's not a matter of freedom of choice but rather a compulsory dictate of realism.

On the other hand, that partnership for sustainable development should embrace also the former colonies of the ancient European powers, among other developing countries, already linked to the EU by international law agreements. Those countries are waiting for the still missing determinant political steps from EU and other Western powers in order to the rising of a more equitable trade relationship and a more effective technological and scientific transfer, two keen areas for the building up of global sustainability.

§7. Last but not least, I would like to remember all of us that the challenges of sustainability do not indicate only a set of harsh perils but show also a bright side. They embody at the same time a source of hope and inspiration to find our common roads into the future.

The challenges of sustainability are awakening in the peoples of Europe -- so long and deeply divided by history and mutual misunderstanding -- the strong feeling that as Europeans we share a common destiny and probably a common destination.

Therefore the challenges of sustainability should invite the EU as a whole, and each one of the EU member States, to the development and implementation of long-run public policies, which constitute the only fruitful way of deepening the federal scope and the federal dynamics within our still fragile and uncertain Union.

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