

Bruges, Potterierei 4  
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**Formal Opening  
of the  
SUSTAINABILITY COLLEGE BRUGES**

*‘Sustainable development and the role of research and teaching Institutions’*

*by Johan Swinnen*

*L.S.,*

It is an honour and a pleasure being with you at this very special occasion. We have indeed many good reasons for being proud of an **initiative** that takes shape here in this historic city, in our neighbourhood, at this very moment, in relation with an extremely important global endeavour.

At the turn of the century the United Nations launched the famous **Millennium Goals**, that guided and inspired the international community mainly in its efforts of fighting poverty. Not without significant and encouraging results.

Two years ago in 2015, a new comprehensive and ambitious program for development that must accompany us towards 2030, was carefully negotiated and unanimously adopted by the UN. The program is driven, propelled by **17 Sustainable Development Goals**, the **SDG's**.

I don't exaggerate by saying that this Charter continues to provoke enthusiastic comments, but also a **lot of dynamics**.

The civil servants of the UN for example tell us that the UN never was equipped with a narrative as inspiring and mobilising as this one. The **SDG's** are the new thinking, the new foundation for development, the **missing link** or the missing piece for ... globalisation.

The globalisation of the previous decennia could not avoid marginalisation, alienation of many people. Many people did miss the boat indeed.

The authors of the Sustainable Goals had this in mind. Development had to be **inclusive**, nobody could be left behind.

Moreover, the Goals are **universal**: *we hebben het niveau van wijsheid en bescheidenheid bereikt om te beseffen en te aanvaarden dat we allen in ontwikkeling zijn.*

We are all in development, we are all developing countries. European and other Western Nations, in this humble conversion, feel as much exposed and challenged as their Southern partners.

Development is not only a matter of co-operation-relations between North and South, between so-called developed and so-called developing countries.

The attention that is focused on mental health, for instance, illustrates perfectly the challenges every society, including ours, is confronted with.

The Goals are **holistic and transversal** as well, they constitute an integrated *ensemble*. It means that all the goals have to do with each other. A silo-approach is to be banned. It is indeed difficult to realise one goal without investing in the others, or even all the others. Just one example might suffice. We may have the best conceived projects, the greatest ambitions, the best people to realise them, if we don't have the institutions that function efficiently and properly, if we don't operate in a context of legal security guaranteed by the rule of law and respect of human rights, we will fail. The book of Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson 'Why Nations fail' explains this perfectly.

It's very tempting to elaborate further on particular characteristics of this new framework of development. But this is not the main purpose of my contribution.

Another promising phenomenon that we fortunately observe is the **multitude of dynamics** that these Goals started to generate.

Political and diplomatic undertakings are neither imaginable nor credible anymore without referring to the agenda 2030.

Likewise, civil society, non-governmental organisations, integrate the sustainability mantra into their charters, action programs and projects.

The private sector, including the business world, become defenders and even pioneers of the new credo. My banker, and your banker also I suppose, recommend investments in sustainability funds.

Last but not least, the media open their columns and studios for debates about new visions of development.

The point I want to make at today's occasion is that the SDG's without any doubt will also inspire and mobilise **our Universities**, the academic world, the researchers, the teachers. I'll try to explain how.

First of all, it is obvious that the **management** of the University or the research institution will **integrate** some of the sustainable development goals. We have to do with the mere application of the goals in the everyday life of the institution, as companies, families, citizens do.

We know that the management of the energy needed for operating the university buildings or for preserving the heritage and patrimony of the institutions draws more attention of the academic authorities.

We know also that some universities do not invest in fossil fuels anymore.

These deliberate policies are enhanced by a genuine adhesion to the objectives of Agenda 2030.

But the University will also display an **advocacy**, constituting a **platform**, a vehicle, a vector of **promotion** of these SDG's. This is the second way of SDG-promotion.

Policies and disciplines are developed inside the University and the various departments/*facultés*, for exploring the implications of the various Goals and for communicating findings and knowledge in this respect.

Universities can excell in selected and multidisciplinary research. They can also be critical observers of the evolution of the life of the SDG's, make studies about the implementation, convey messages about improvement and adaptation of the Goals.

Finally, the SDG's can stimulate the activation and upgrading of the **co-operation** between academic institutions.

Many fields of co-operation have been identified in the SDG's. These are susceptible to research programs organized by several universities.

The *universitas* plays here its plain and original role. Being a center of intelligence, open to the universal world, serving the world by sharing research and knowledge.

It becomes increasingly clear that our society is able to tackle the challenges we are faced with if actions are sustained and supported by scientific fundamentals.

Therefore, the role and mission of academics and scientists can not be underestimated. Their co-operation, their complicity is an essential socle for national and international opinion- and decisionmaking.

The League of European Research institutes, LERU, is well placed and determined to make its contribution. We are confident that this commitment will be inspired and even guided by the incentives of sustainability.

But there is more to be done. There is a lot of room and opportunity for action.

Our world is changing, is confronted with **important and positive developments**.

Without ignoring risks and dangers, we cannot deny that globalisation and digitalisation, just to name those dynamics, have positive impacts on development.

The fight against poverty started bearing results, the Paris agreement was an important, maybe not a sufficient, but as an important a necessary step in the right direction, gender equality is making spectacular progress, enormous efforts are made for predicting climate calamities and the spread of diseases. We witness worldwide sensibilisation for education and health. More consideration is given to physically and mentally vulnerable persons. And so on.

At the same time we are facing **turmoil, destabilisation, *ontreddering***.

The most worrying would be a dilution, *een verwatering*, of moral values, the loss of confidence in democratic values, the weakening of the importance of fundamental human rights.

Our climate and environment are in danger, did Paris really deliver? How can we improve our food security? How shall we manage the migration floods? How shall we manage Brexit and launch the European relance? How to preserve the nuclear deterrence and handle terrorism?

Our optimism about development can be impeded, hampered indeed by **uncertainties and doubts**.

The mission of the research and teaching institutions includes making the right and critical analyses, without *complaisance*, without *arrogance* either.

*Universitas* means thinking and teaching without frontiers, without physical nor mental borders, being a **critical conscience**, *een kritisch geweten*.

The numerous challenges I just referred to must be tackled, by all our *forces vives*, *levendige krachten* in society.

The scientific, academic world can and must also play its role. A constructive role.

In this respect, shouldn't we dare to imagine that European and African universities, for instance, examine, together, how both continents can work together for managing the climate change and acting against deforestation? Another coalition of research centers could examine ways and means of storage of nuclear waste.

Shouldn't we even assume that Universities of various continents, cultures and civilisations study together the values and shortcomings of ... democracy, of elections, or undertake inquiries about the significance and importance of institution building and rule of law for sustainable development?

Even if these joint undertakings can lead to critical conclusions and even indignation. At a recent colloque in Leuven I couldn't resist talking of a possible 'International May 68', 'un Mai 68 international.'

*Ce ne sera probablement pas un mouvement identique, poussé par les mêmes considérations et exigences, par les mêmes contestations, ni même opérés par les mêmes forces. Mais ce serait peut-être un remède contre l'indifférence, faisant barrage au cynisme.*

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Our Belgian universities and other academic institutions are engaged in the SDG-exercise, examining how they can activate, channel and publicise their expertise and management in relation with sustainable development. These endeavours must be welcomed and encouraged.

Having said this, I cannot but conclude that the creation of the **Sustainability College of Bruges** is very good news.

This college is called to **combine the three missions** I mentioned:

- integrating sustainability in its own management,
- offering a platform for substantiating the development goals and being an important actor and vector for spreading the knowledge and promotion of this kind of inclusive development -and finally being a pioneer for stimulating co-operation, complementarity and complicity among scientific believers.

Science and belief are indeed the levers we see at work here at the **Potterierei**. I am confident that this will be an exciting **working place**, an atelier and laboratory where solid analyses are made, and innovative insights are produced. But also a place that radiates, and provides inspiration and tools for national, European and international dynamics, rendering great service to our societies.

I wish to congratulate you Mr Chairman and your team and to express my strong confidence in your endeavour.

Bernard Picard, the Swiss pilot of *Solar Impulse*, who addressed a few days ago an international audience in the Flagey in Brussels, composed of politicians, civil society members, scientists, captains of industry, explained the win-win of commitment for sustainability of all these actors. With him, I would just say: *keep faith*.

*Werkend in vertrouwen, zo staan we sterker, durven we meer en kunnen we meer.*

*Je vous remercie , ik dank u.*

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