

Edito

Business of sustainable development or sustainable development of business?

«The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is the only international organisation responsible for the rules and regulations that govern trade between countries. (...) The aim is to help the producers or goods and services, exporters and importers to conduct their activities». cf. www.wto.org.

This institution promotes generalised free trade, which is supposed to bring about a model of well-being for everyone. It therefore sets out to combat any form of «protectionism», even if this has been introduced in the name of social cohesion. The ways in which social rules and regulations are introduced into trade practices are being targeted by this organisation that has been endowed with supranational powers, despite the fact that it is far from being a model democratic organisation.

Let us look at just one of the many examples that exist: the WTO has recently issued a decision regarding the authorisation of GMOs. According to the WTO, **the bans imposed on the use of GMOs by certain national European parliaments** on the basis of the precaution principle, **are contrary to international trade agreements**. It would appear that the notion of the precaution principle was first introduced in Germany, where the "Vorsorgeprinzip" authorised the public authorities to take «*all of the measures considered necessary and reasonable*» in order to handle any risks that might occur.

The Rio Conference enshrined the Precaution Principle on 13 June 1992: «*in order to protect the environment, precautionary measures must be broadly applied by the States according to their ability to do so. In cases in which there is a risk of serious and irreversible damage, the absence of absolute scientific certitude should not be used as a pretext to delay the adoption of effective measures designed to prevent degradation of the environment.*»

The EU's policy on the environment (cf. article 130, R 2 of the Treaty of Maastricht, 1992) is geared towards a high level of protection, taking into account the diversity of the situations faced across the various regions of the EU. It is founded upon the principles of precaution and of preventive action, on the principle of correction, at source if at all possible, of damage done to the environment, on the basis of the polluter pays principle.

The Gothenburg European Council (2001) devised a sustainable development strategy for the European Union, under the responsibility of the Commission. Alongside the environmental dimension added to the «Lisbon Strategy», the EU has set out a series of guidelines including: **making sure that the internationalisation of trade serves the purposes of sustainable development, the fight against poverty and the promotion of social development, the sustainable management of natural and environmental resources.**

These guidelines are at the very heart of the solidarity-based economy: deciding your own destiny whilst being fully aware of what is going on around you, without doing anything that might harm the interests of future generations and by always expressing a preference for the mechanisms of solidarity.

Let us make the most of it before these processes are declared to be outside of the law because quite soon, in the name of the right to carry out free trade practices, the sustainable development, which is our main reference point for our promotion of economic alternatives, will be reduced to its most simplest form: to make business sustainable!

Eric LAVILLUNIERE

Interview with Guilda Farrell et Samuel Thirion

From the DG for Social Cohesion at the Council of Europe (COE) in Strasbourg

You co-ordinate a European platform for ethical and solidarity-based initiatives. Can you tell us about the aims of this platform?

ST: Our starting point is to work within the social cohesion strategy by focussing on the fact that all actors within society must bear joint responsibility for everyone's well-being. In order to achieve this, we tend to favour dialogue between the public authorities and citizens' networks that are part of a responsible and solidarity-based approach. We have encouraged the creation of a platform for dialogue between the institutions of the Council of Europe and the citizens' networks that are active within the economy and that have formed an inter-network grouping composed of representatives of the solidarity-based financial sector, fair trade, responsible consumption, integration social enterprises and networks that have a local approach to the solidarity-based economy. We have devised a three-year strategy in order to develop the platform around a certain number of themes. One of the chosen themes is that of the excessive debt burden faced by certain families.

Why focus on excessive debt levels?

GF: the platform has a clear aim, that of contributing to the fight against poverty and exclusion. In other words, we wish to establish how citizens can contribute to the achievement of these aims and how they can influence public policies. That is why we are striving to draw up an inventory of all of the forms of solidarity that may be developed by citizens in order to combat poverty. The phenomenon of excessive levels of debt is something that we are seeing increasingly across Europe. Furthermore, it is caused by the constant efforts made in some quarters to push people towards excessive levels of consumption and materialism. We cannot respond to this situation in a solely legal and coercive way. We must also think of solidarity-based responses that work through other mechanisms that are geared towards long-term, sustainable solutions.

Is this a pretext to question the methods of consumption and the ways in which people are constantly urged to increase their levels of consumption, so as to end up only dealing with the consequences?

ST: Yes, of course, and that is why it is so important for us to mobilise both the solidarity-based financial networks and the responsible consumption networks.

Do you focus on any other specific themes?

GF: We certainly do. We have also set ourselves general political aims. For example, together with the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and other organisations, we would like to organise a debate in 2008 on how citizens contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. We will be working with this in mind so as to establish the forms of citizens' responsibility and expression that contribute to the fight against poverty through market choices, rather than as a result of charity, which is an area that many organisations are already engaged in.

ST: We will also tackle other topics such as responsible consumerism for children, instruments that may be used to inform the public and make the public more aware of responsible consumption ...however, the programme is currently under discussion. The idea is to have one theme or topic per year that will then be dealt with in various ways over the course of time, starting with the study phase, the proposal phase, followed by a process of dialogue and finally the decision-making and action phase.

So there is no explicit reference to the solidarity-based economy?

ST: Our focus is not so much on the approach in terms of the development of a third sector, rather it is on citizens as consum'actors (consumption/consump'action) and on savers who, as a result of their attitude and behaviour, introduce ethical considerations into the markets and participate in actions that are of general interest.

Continues overleaf

Book review

«La société malade de la gestion»

2005 – Published by Seuil – Paris.

Vincent de Gaulejac

Director of the Laboratoire de Changement Social and Professor of Sociology at Paris VII University.

Without being an expert on the solidarity-based economy, Vincent de Gaulejac shares some very interesting ideas with us from the point of view of the sociology of management and of management practices in enterprises, but also as someone who has managerial responsibilities himself (as Director of a research laboratory), as a researcher (a “non-utilitarian”), as a citizen (concerned about the dangerous directions in which our society would appear to be drifting) and as a clinician (sensitive to anything that generates or causes a sense of ill-being and suffering).

He endorses our own choice of basing our view of the solidarity-based economy on a multidisciplinary approach. Thanks should go to Ben Goerens (OPE-Luxembourg) who has been instrumental in helping us to discover this book.

Management practices are designed to both rationalise and to optimise the way in which organisations function. A company manager serves the “company’s interests”. Technological progress has led to the globalisation of the economy and there are no longer any obstacles to the movement of capital. The economy has become increasingly driven by financial concerns and the gap between shareholders’ interests on the one hand, and workers’ interests on the other, has widened. Increasingly, the interests of a capital-based company lie in the generation of a return on its capital. The manager ends up dedicating all of his time and efforts to the achievement of this aim, to the detriment of the workforce.

Management sciences consider human beings to be part of the company’s resources. In today’s society, company managers are entirely results-driven and have lost sight of any moral considerations they may have had in the past.

A manager expends his/her power and energy focusing entirely upon production targets. Managerial power imprisons individuals: it leads them into voluntary submission before this new managerial ideology that, quite curiously, also makes men and women lose all sense of proportion. The anxiety culture has become the norm. One has to excel in every aspect of one’s existence (even in one’s emotions) or perish. One has to win as an individual in order to exist: it is the «lutte des places »* or the “race to be well placed”.

The economy also dictates its laws to politicians, who are confined to the management of the social effects of economic development, without necessarily having any control over them, by applying the management ideology as a model of governance. This “utilitarian” approach only serves to strengthen the symbolic crisis. The generation of wealth is in conflict with well-being. A great deal of current economic thought is now collapsing into this new paradigm.

Once he has brilliantly expounded his views on the misdeeds of the management ideology, the author then wonders about how it might be possible to escape from this tyranny. He suggests that economic aspects be reconciled with social aspects, or that efforts should be made to promote the solidarity-based economy, all of which proves that there are alternatives to the market-based economy and this, in turn, leads us to reiterate, once again, the fact that establishing good relationships is far more important than being in possession of material goods. In the author’s view, this would help to reconcile management with society.

I think that we can all be in agreement with him when he quotes Augusto Boal, «being a citizen is not all about living in a society, it is about changing society».

Critique and comments by E.L

* this is also the title of another book by the same author.

Interview G. Farrell and S. Thirion (continued)

An ethical approach to the markets is something that is very much in fashion at the moment, along with Corporate Social Responsibility or Socially Responsible Investments.

ST: This is an important topic for the EU Commission, however our approach is different since citizens constitute our starting point, rather than companies. Citizenship has always been one of the key elements in the work carried out by the Council of Europe.

GF: We act as intermediaries between governments and the bodies that represent civil society. That is a bit different from what you do at INEES...

Indeed it is. In fact, whilst you are seeking to change market rules, we are trying to encourage the emergence of a 3rd pillar (between the public and private economy), but we have the same objectives in terms of solidarity and also, I would say, with regard to a better distribution of wealth.

ST: We believe that fair trade is a very significant example, since it integrates positive external elements into the price of its products and it therefore has an influence on the market.

It is quite true that fair trade does sell goods that incorporate social aims (purchase of raw materials at a fair price, decent working conditions, funding of projects that benefit the community...). However, the more important the social dimension is, the more difficult it is to integrate the financial cost entirely within the price of the products sold. It is at this point that the solidarity-based economy approach has to play a role since, thanks to public subsidies and resources provided on a voluntary basis, we are going to be able to set a price that makes the product affordable for consumers (who will never pay € 60 for a packet of coffee, even if they are prepared to pay a small premium on fair trade goods).

GT: Unfortunately, there are still too few of us to do this, since those people who are involved in this area often have little credibility in the eyes of the decision-makers. We therefore all need to get together and perhaps we should look at whether we can work together in some specific areas.

ST: Yes, because it is clear that we share the same analyses and have the same objectives in terms of the changes we would like to see happening. We need to continue our discussions on the question of whether we wish to change the market or to encourage the emergence of a 3rd pillar, although that is perhaps not so important at the moment, since there are already many areas in which our ideas converge and the alliance of different approaches has the potential to produce a great deal of progress. The development of the solidarity-based economy could be an area in which we can work, particularly given its contribution to the fight against poverty and the promotion of social cohesion. Our aim is to achieve specific results in terms of changes being made to policies and this is not an easy thing to achieve, since sometimes extremely good conferences and reports do not produce any tangible outcomes.

Well, that is something else that we have in common, since our aim is to develop a line of argument that we can propose to the public authorities, since they are very much interested in this kind of input to help them in their decision-making processes and it is also important to provide material that can be fed into the dialogue.

ST: Given the European dimension of your work, you could certainly contribute to the research activity we have launched, through the platform, in the area of the solidarity-based economy, since this is the best way in which we can combine our mutual resources.

And in any case, we have already established a dialogue.

ST: That’s right and I have to say that I am very pleased about this and I sincerely hope that we will find further ways in which we are able to cooperate in the future.

Compiled by Eric LAVILLUNIERE