

SUSTAINABLE CITIES: BUENOS AIRES AND THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALISATION

I would like to thank the President of the Brussels – European Union Chapter of the Club of Rome, for this invitation to put forward some reflections on a theme that is close to me, Buenos Aires, my city: the city in which I was born, where I have been and I am happy. To say "my city" implies that I recognise the city as my home, with its history and its own culture that strengthens a feeling of identity.

But on this occasion, it is not the intimate Buenos Aires, with its charming streets that inspired Borges, that I will talk about, but the Buenos Aires that confronts the challenges of Globalisation, this phenomenon that everyone feels but that nobody can define with certainty: basically, a world technological, financial, and economic process of interconnection. In reality, Globalisation is a natural consequence of the economic aspirations of the towns and of individuals. The voyages of Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus were globalising enterprises, adventures that were undertaken with economic aims: to open markets, to buy and sell.

Globalisation of our time differs little from those distant models, except for technology that powers it to unimaginable scales. It is thus an absolute and irreversible phenomenon, that presents challenges and dangers but also opportunities.

In this impressive intense Globalisation that has been gathering pace since the last decades of the last century, we find main protagonists: the Nations somewhat weakened, the Corporations: some harmful, and others not as much, and the Global cities.

And here is the Buenos Aires that portrays itself, and which I will talk about.

I would rather affirm that Buenos Aires has always had a global vocation, and this is in agreement with the spirit of the Argentine Republic: A Nation that has built itself; "for us, for our posterity and for all the men of the world that would like to inhabit Argentine soil", according to the Introduction of the National Constitution, written in 1853.

From 1880 and during the first decades of the 20th century, immigrants from all parts of the world came to Argentina in search of work opportunities, progress and peace. The great majority of them established themselves in Buenos Aires. Except the native inhabitants, every Argentine can be affirmed of Syrian-Lebanese, Hebrew, English, Greek, German, Polish, Russian, French, Spanish and Italian ancestry. From there the proverb that says that The Argentines descended from ships, ships that arrived at Buenos Aires, the harbour city, the mandatory entrance for the whole country.

What made it possible for those immigrants coming from such diverse cultures to share in peace with the Argentines, the same soil and a same national destiny, was the feeling of respect and the practice of solidarity.

It is extraordinary and worthy of compliment the way in which men and women that spoke different languages united in the same identity, finding themselves in those

shared dreams. In Buenos Aires discrimination was not known, neither was racial hatred.

Buenos Aires's core is made up of a blend of races, creeds, nationalities, languages and cultures. The tango is one of its more emblematic fruits, perhaps because of that it awakes this sort of universal passion. And this causes me to think that, in a way, that what's global is also sensitively intimate in Buenos Aires. If something characterises the Argentine and especially the "porteño", it is his universal vocation, his love for different cultures.

But speaking of another Globalisation, this one in which we are all immersed, it was in the 1990's, that Buenos Aires became a global city, for which the challenges and dangers that must be faced are not much different to the ones that other cities of the world face.

We say that Buenos Aires is a global city, but what does this signify? The global cities are the nodes of globalisation, where the economy and the finances of the world and international politics concentrate and pass through. All this generates an enormous dynamism, but it also exposes the cities and exacerbates in them the problems of Globalisation, problems that can be gathered together under the concept of sustainability.

This is a relatively new concept that arises, primarily, to realise the relation that exists between the actions of men and its environmental impact. In 1972, the Club of Rome raised the alarm with the famous report *The Limits to Growth*, in which a warning was issued about the dangers of irrational production, given that, definitely, an unlimited growth on a planet with limited resources cannot be sustained.

Progressively, sustainability passed from a vision centralized on the environmental deterioration towards one much more compressive that considers emotional, cultural, institutional, technical, political, socioeconomic aspects.

Thus, sustainability is an environmental, social, and economic equilibrium.

With regards to Buenos Aires, the problems of the sustainability manifest themselves with clarity in this way, according to which, each aspect impacts on the others and none can be solved in isolation.

From the environmental point of view, we find ourselves with a city that has to solve problems such as high waste generation, water contamination and greenhouse gases emissions.

The City of Buenos Aires is an autonomous entity of 200 sq kms located by the Rio de la Plata and surrounded by the Province of Buenos Aires, which is an important fact at an internal level, given that the effects of the city impacts in a direct way to the province from which it supplies itself and to which it returns its waste, for example. The problem of waste recycling is not only a problem of the city but also of the provincial environment. Buenos Aires is an important producer of refuse and of contamination.

In the year 2000, a new phenomenon added to the urban landscape: men, women and children appeared pulling carts in which they collected refuse that they loaded after into

what has been called "ghost trains", that carry the refuse to the province. A certain type of waste collectors, dedicated to the task of collecting rubbish that they then would sell for its recycling.

These people appeared at one of the most critical moments in our recent history; this was a way that many families adopted in order to survive without begging. This way of survival born from desperation has been maintained in time, until today, and we should ask ourselves under what conditions and at what sanitary cost.

Transport is another large current problem to resolve, and that the city Government should face it jointly with the National Government, given that the issue of public transport falls under the sphere of the National Government. The streets do not have the capacity to sustain intense public transport circulation and the growing number of private vehicles. Environmental pollution and greenhouse gases emissions add to ill humour: an aspect to which one must not be indifferent at all.

Furthermore, the public transport system is inefficient. Daily, a great number of people travel to and from the province to the city to work, and then returning to their homes again. The transport system does not satisfy the growing demand; many services are of poor quality, that is the case of trains, for example, a cause of insecurity and dangerous social stress.

That is to say, the city of Buenos Aires does not reach the level of satisfaction that the population requires.

With regards to water issues, the City Government intends to complete by the year 2011 an important project to make pipelines for subterranean rivers, create new drains and the modernisation of the sewage water purification process, but the task of taking care of the water resources goes beyond that of an environmental question: it is a social question, if we just take into account the quantity of marginal settlements in the very heart of the city, where poverty and life habits are contaminant agents and where the drinking water and the sewer water creates real sources of infection. Children, sick due to drinking contaminated water are routine cases in our hospitals, where they arrive with serious symptoms of diarrhoea and dehydration.

The environmental problems are well recognised, they are clearly identified and the way to approach their solutions is well-known, from the scientific to the technological aspects. But those solutions do not only depend on the technicians and scientists, not even on the correct implementation of specific environmental policies.

My city's problem, like that of so many other globalised cities is one of social and economic sustainability. It is the community that guarantees a clean-up and environmental preservation undertaking. What the ecological problem exposes is, to a great measure, a dysfunction of political and social nature, a dysfunction that responds to distortions in the economic performance of society.

One of the large stigmas of Globalisation that has been exacerbated in Buenos Aires, is that of social inequity, and the main obstacle for a solution of a weak and risky environmental situation is, precisely, social inequity.

The Brazilian sociologist, Roberto Guimaraes says: "In situations of extreme poverty, the impoverished human being, marginalised and excluded from society and the national economy, has no commitment to avoid environmental degradation". The sociologist Claudia Tomadoni adds: "In situations of extreme affluence, the wealthy human being, included, neither possesses a commitment for sustainability", and he practices what the economists that followed the line of René Charbonneau named: "negative externality or dis-economy", that is to transfer to the future generations and the impoverished sectors, the environmental costs of affluence. Thus, nature is devastated by social inequity.

And this is where I want to focus my attention.

It could be said that the pressing tasks that should be carried out and that the City Government aims to carry out in the present and the future years have to do with practical questions of environmental sustainability. Thus it is, but the obstacle will continue being social sustainability, if the gap between rich and poor continues to deepen.

And this is the great globalisation challenge, so much more fundamental than that of gas emissions reductions, water clean-up and residues recycling, because the solution to these issues will depend on the human factor. We should not detach the environmental problems from the social and economic problems generated by a mistaken development concept.

In Buenos Aires, the situation is evidently clear and it is an opportunity to recognize that the environmental consequences of the way in which the population utilises natural resources have to do with social situations.

Amongst the most urgent actions to face at the moment and for the future generations is that of the rethinking of the economy and education, and not only in Buenos Aires, but in the whole world.

As well as the race to salvage finances to avoid a collapse of the world economy, it is seriously time to begin an undertaking to rescue the human being. An economic model of exclusion is absolutely unsustainable, socially and environmentally unsustainable, and there will be neither technology nor scientific knowledge that could confront or maintain a deepened social explosion of non sustainability.

The global cities are centres of risk. According to reports from the UNDP, towards the year 2025, 2/3 of the world population will live in urban areas. Buenos Aires harbours today 3000000 inhabitants within its limits, and 12 million inhabitants, if we consider the Metropolitan Area, with a great sector being isolated and marginalized: a source of criminality, insecurity and unhappiness.

Education is the other field of fundamental importance: What type of education is required for the formation of the citizen of a world that must face such vital challenges? An education focused in the scientific and technological aspects is necessary but not sufficient.

Argentina, and therein Buenos Aires, has top-level scientists and technicians. Among the scientists: Argentina, for example, is well known for the generation of a great number of highly qualified biologists; but in a world with complex problems of economic nature in the essential sense of the term (the economy deals with household's support), and social nature (equity and justice), the work should be interdisciplinary, including the vision of the humanistic disciplines: sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, to contemplate the fundamental problems that have carried us to this contradiction of technological and economic growth against the diminishing of human development.

There is something that education has neglected, or forgotten to consider: the ethical dimension of actions. From my point of view, a new educational paradigm should replace the concept of sustainability by one of ethics of development. An education that, instead of coaching for competitiveness, nurtures solidarity, like the education of the first globalisation of Buenos Aires, that made it be what it was at that time: a home of peace, security, progress and hope, for all men of the world that wanted to inhabit it.

What it was and what it is, because whoever arrives in Buenos Aires, falls in love with the city. It is not casual that it has become, in the last few years, the most popular latinamerican touristic destination. The city's spirit fascinates due to the fact that globalisation and its evils have not been able to spoil it yet.

Buenos Aires continues to be a city of friendship (with its famous bars crowded with people deep in conversation); with its theatres (there are more theatres in Buenos Aires than in New York); with its bookshops (El Ateneo, for example, a historical theatre converted into a bookshop, considered among the 10 most important bookshops in the world, and the second most beautiful); an annual International Book Fair (the 1st to be created in Latin America, the biggest and the most important of the continent), and with its suburbs brimming with tango and restaurants from typically local to some of the most sophisticated of the international cuisine and the argentine wines, already a national culture. Neighborhoods such as Palermo with its nostalgic flavour, Recoleta, the historical San Telmo in the romantic south, Puerto Madero, converted docklands close to the river). Buenos Aires also accounts for a population with high qualified technical population, health service and universities of excellence, and also high quality communications. It is a relatively young city that seems to carry very old traditions, maybe those that it inherited from Europe and that emerged within with the charm of singularity. Borges's verses make sense: "For me it makes for the tale that began Buenos Aires/ I feel her eternal like water and air". That is why in Buenos Aires globalisation could be an opportunity.

In this sense, the City Government has requested the Argentine Chapter of the Club of Rome, the structuring and coordination of an International interdisciplinary "think tank" that can be in charge of conveying forward a task of analysis and reflection, helping to think profoundly to provide answers to the huge challenges of these times, for the purpose of making Buenos Aires a city adapted to Globalisation in a transcending manner: a Globalisation that recovers the human dimension, with consolidation of justice and the dignity of men and in the safeguard of nature and life.

And this is the great opportunity that globalisation presents: by multiplying experiences through its interconnected nodes, that of opening new hope in the midst of global cities so that they will prosper in the world.

The Club of Rome has a lot to contribute with this kind of task, acting in its network of National Chapters, exchanging ideas and experiences, connecting intellectuals and scientists, sharing know-how and efforts.

And I wish to end with what my beloved Buenos Aires has taught me:
Above all, respect and solidarity.