

# How Graeme Maxton plans to breathe new life into a decades-old NGO



Graeme Maxton, secretary-general of the Club of Rome. Photo by: Club of Rome  
The way the new secretary-general of the [Club of Rome](#) sees his role, it's akin to being the conductor of an orchestra, ensuring that “everyone plays in harmony.”

Graeme Maxton took over as secretary-general in October last year, and found an organization that had an “astonishing reputation,” which has since faded. He saw the “lack of clear direction” but believed it was still “capable of re-establishing itself on the global stage.” The think tank — which came to prominence in 1972 with its report, “The Limits to Growth,” and sparked off much of the environmental movement — had lost its way, lacking clear programs and projects, and with weak media relations.

It needed a shake-up.

As with many similar organizations of its size, an immediate task was to sort out funding. One of the first problems was that costs to run the back office were beyond fixed revenue. Knowing that it is easier to procure project than core funding, he was faced with the difficult task of cutting staff.

“Too many staff [members] were not project-based, which added to overheads, so we were forced to lay them off,” he explained. With a scaled-back secretariat, the Winterthur, Switzerland-based Club is now much more financially secure, with core funding that comes mostly from local sources for the next five years.

“However, we were still living with our past,” Maxton said, “and foundations we wanted to work with or link up with needed to see the value of working with us, so we had to present a new strategy and clearer sense of direction and purpose. We now have a better view of how to go forward with relations with external partners and the media.”

## **The ‘conscience of the world’**

He has embarked on “a big program to rejuvenate the organization and make it more coherent.” The Club, which Maxton describes as “the conscience of the world,” now has a five-year plan, working in two major and intertwined areas — the environmental and social challenges facing humanity.

“Our overall objective is to look at how to reduce the human ecological footprint, so we can all live within the boundaries of the planet. Our programs look at how to transform social and economic systems and so to reduce the environmental effects of humanity,” he explained. This notably goes back to the Club’s original roots in “The Limits to Growth.”

With this new plan, Maxton has approached several foundations for support as well as others to collaborate on projects, and this is beginning to bear fruit. He takes a cautious approach, however, perhaps in line with his general long-term view, in choosing who to work with. He feels the Club has to be careful in order not to be tarnished with national or political brushes.

“There are not many like us,” he said.

As an economist, Maxton has written on the need for a reappraisal of the current economic system, and his book, “The End of Progress — How Modern Economics Has Failed Us,” which was nominated for the 2011 Financial Times Book of the Year Award, also became an international best-seller. So he is in pole position to formulate programs on redefining the economic system, and this has helped to establish links with a newly established Danish organization, the [KR Foundation](#). Thanks to this relationship, the Club is assembling a group of 12 leading economists in the summer to discuss how to move to a different economic system.

Other projects underway include one to develop a complex computer model to examine the effects of changing the energy mix on employment. The initial results, looking at Sweden, show that moving from carbon-based to renewable energy sources can actually boost employment through the creation of new green jobs. With funding from the MAVA Foundation, there are now plans to extend this project into the Netherlands, Spain and possibly the U.K.

## **Club of Rome in the developing world**

The Club has a global reach with 30 national organizations, mainly in Europe, but with a growing base of five groups in Latin America, two in Asia and one in Africa, which he describes as “mini” Clubs of Rome.

At some point he wants to establish a project on reducing youth unemployment or underemployment in the developing world, and to work more closely with countries that are looking at alternative economic systems not postulated on economic growth. He is also excited about a project with a Chinese think tank (which he would rather not name at this stage) about decoupling resource use from economic growth.

#### **Maxton’s 6 ways to turn an organization around**

- Get costs in line with revenue fast — shedding staff quickly, if necessary.
- Stick with your core. Use your reputation in a particular field to build up links and new projects.
- Build broad consensus over a program before you start work, but accept that not everyone will agree.
- Give yourself five years to fully re-establish the organization.
- Bring in new voices and approaches from the outside to rejuvenate the organization gradually — particularly younger thinkers.
- Think carefully before joining with other organizations on campaigns and weigh up how it will reflect on your own reputation.

This approach has meant taking the long view. Maxton described how he began work on redefining the program and strategy a year before he took up the helm, and how in an organization where the post of secretary-general is voted on by members, he spent 12 months building consensus around the program. This explains why he sees himself as the conductor getting all the elements to work together.

#### **Developing the membership base**

The Club of Rome is a unique organization in that, as well as its national groups, it has a membership restricted to 100 members, drawn from the world of science, politics and public policy, including Nobel laureates and former heads of state. Maxton aims to make the Club more collegiate and get members more involved in projects.

“These are successful notable individuals at the top of their careers, so we are trying to get them to cooperate together and with us,” he said.

He is also anxious to bring down the average membership age, encouraging more thinkers and policymakers in the 30s and 40s. He feels this also reflects the changing political reality.

“In the past, the Club engaged with experienced politicians and national leaders in order to influence national and international policies,” the secretary-general explained. “Social

change happens differently now. Around the world there are millions of young people who share our views. I want to engage with them to get our message across.”

This was also a reason to rejuvenate the program, so that more people could see the value of engaging with the Club.

One future project he is excited about, which he feels will interest the youth cohort, is in Spain. This looks at solving the problems of unemployment and inequality without the need for any economic growth. This type of project returns to the Club original remit, and is an example of what Maxton describes as the Club’s “Wonderful Curve of History.”

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