

Making decisions today for tomorrow



A panel of four experts discussed the potential of politics to shape the fate of cities. Acknowledging the enormity of the task of making cities around the world more sustainable, they unanimously called for action, not only on the part politicians, but also on the part of industry and private individuals.

The final panel discussion moderated by Rolf Soiron, Chair of the Advisory Board of the Holcim Foundation, situated urban design and planning in the context of sustainable development. The panelists included Molly O'Meara Sheehan of the Worldwatch Institute; former director of the United Nations Environment Program, Klaus Töpfer; Elmar Ledergerber, current Mayor of Zurich; and urban planner and theorist, Michael Sorkin. The group acknowledged the need for drastic measures to implement the United Nation's millennium agenda. "But people today are impatient," cautioned Klaus Töpfer. "I can understand that. I used to live in Nairobi. I told the people there: 'It will take a generation





before life improves here.’ They answered: ‘But we have only this life!’ The consequence is often that people leave instead of working to improve things.”

“Change is possible already today.” Molly O’Meara Sheehan

Can politicians change things?

Who has the power to effect positive change? In discussions about the development of the planet, politicians often become scapegoats when they are accused of failing to live up to their responsibilities. “Politicians mirror the voice of the people; at least that’s how it is in Switzerland,” Elmar Ledergerber commented. “If politicians represent positions that the population does not support, they will not be re-elected.” This means that ultimately, we have the politicians – and thus also the



Molly O’Meara Sheehan, USA

Every year, the Worldwatch Institute publishes a new volume in the series *State of the World*. The 2007 volume investigates the topic *Our Urban Future*. Molly O’Meara Sheehan was project director for the 2007 volume, which investigates the topic *Our Urban Future*. “Politics can be both a driver and a barrier,” she noted during the panel discussion. She told the story of a woman in the South Bronx of New York who had four children. One child died of asthma because the air was so bad. “You can’t find fresh vegetables and it’s not safe to travel by bicycle.” The woman received money from the government and founded a community garden in her neighborhood. “That’s the right idea. Money must be made available to the neighborhoods, and they should be able to decide how it will be used. Change comes from the bottom up.”



Elmar Ledergerber, Switzerland

Six times in a row the international Mercer Study named Zurich the city with the highest quality of life in the world. Mayor Elmar Ledergerber is convinced that this achievement has much to do with dialogue. "In Zurich, all stakeholders stay in constant contact with each other. We have a system of direct democracy. Every large project must be approved by parliament and in certain cases also by the general public. Every year we have at least six popular voting rounds. Our politics, our strategies, our projects are continually assessed by the people." Zurich's success is also due to close collaboration among politicians, planners, and universities. "I won't say that politicians can't think," says Ledergerber, "but they do need the support of experts who deal with certain problems every day."



Michael Sorkin, USA

"Regarding energy consumption, New York is the most sustainable city in the United States," argued Michael Sorkin, an architect, author, and urban planner who has received many awards. "Per capita energy consumption is far below the national average." The reason is relatively simple, he says: "We use public transportation much more than other cities do. Dense cities are energy efficient. And households in New York are considerably smaller than in other American cities." Architecture is extremely important if we want a more sustainable world, but architectural answers to the challenges of our time are not enough. "It is imperative that we change our behavior patterns; they are simply not sustainable. We must shape our environment to make do with less. And we can do it!"

“We have the technologies to solve the problems; now we need the will to apply them.” Elmar Ledergerber

politics – that we want. Confidence in the ability of government to bring change is generally waning, Klaus Töpfer is convinced: "In Germany, voter turnout is well below 50 percent. Maybe people think they are powerless to influence the forces that drive development. Everything becomes privatized, and suddenly people ask: Why do we need government anyway?"

“We must all take more responsibility.” Michael Sorkin

Politics creates markets

The economy governs with increasing force. "Many people are convinced that it's good this way, because the market will regulate everything," Klaus Töpfer suggests. But he himself remains skeptical: "As an economist I must say that the market has sway only when there is a demand for goods in limited supply. The right to emit CO₂ is for example not such a limited good, and hence there is no market here. But as soon as we have a political decision to limit CO₂ emissions, a market forms, and perhaps we can indeed leave this market to itself. Political decisions can create markets, and sometimes they have to!"

It's up to each individual

Michael Sorkin expressed his conviction that making the world more sustainable is not just the job of decision-makers in government and business. "We must all take more responsibility. We are the ones who are ultimately responsible to change our lifestyle. If people all over the world lived like Americans, we would need two additional planets to produce everything they consumed." Is humankind as a whole perhaps not yet ready for such a change? Elmar Ledergerber believes that it is in fact urgently necessary to look beyond one's own borders: "Our political and economic system poorly anticipates future development. We must learn to make the right decisions for tomorrow today, for example concerning energy prices and consumption."

“Political decisions can create markets.”

Klaus Töpfer

Making changes now

In spite of the complexity of the problem, Molly O'Meara Sheehan is convinced that we could take many measures already today that would lead to a more sustainable world. "Millions in Africa and Asia have no access to clean water and sanitation. Millions of people die because of polluted water. I am convinced that we can solve this problem during this generation." The other panelists – and the majority of audience, animated to discussion – agreed with Molly O'Meara Sheehan. Even though there is no instant recipe for a sustainable world, change is possible, step by step. "But we need more research," insisted Klaus Töpfer. Elmar Ledergerber added that "we have the technologies it takes to solve the problems; now we need the will to apply them!"



Klaus Töpfer, Germany

"When I was born, 2.6 billion people lived on the earth," remarked Klaus Töpfer, former Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and founding member of the Advisory Board of the Holcim Foundation. "Today there are 6.6 billion." The world is changing dramatically; everything happens at increasing speed. It's taking barely 30 years in China for development that took 150 years in today's developed countries. This has enormous consequences for urban planning: "We need flexible structures in order to react quickly to the fast pace of change." Cities and buildings must be designed to be reused in the future under other conditions. "In Berlin, we recycled the Reichstag," Töpfer recalled. "And the Parliament is also in a renovated old building. Recycling buildings is not nostalgic – it's a step into the future!"