



**JANUARY 30, 2022**

***COMMON GOOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE***

**TRIGLAV CIRCLE “ZOOM” MEETING JANUARY 23, 2021**

**REPORT**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

I.	INTRODUCTION .....	2
II.	VIEWS ON THE COMMON GOOD AS A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY .....	4
	Address common “bads” rather than an elusive common good .....	4
	The common good: an antidote to the neo-liberal ideology .....	7
	The common good is social justice.....	8
	Respecting and listening to the poor: an approach to a just society .....	11
	A step by step progress towards global citizenship .....	13
	A global common good through a moral and spiritual transformation .....	15
III.	HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMMON GOOD.....	16
	From the industrial revolution to the digital revolution .....	16
	Civilizations and nations are mortal .....	18
	Historical cycles and dynamics of the common good .....	21
IV.	PRIVATE AND PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMON GOOD.....	24
	Private enterprises and the common good.....	24
	Management of a common good by a public local authority .....	26
	The state as an entrepreneur for common goods and the common good.....	28
V.	IV. DEMOCRACY AND THE COMMON GOOD .....	28
	Plato, Shoeki and Pigou .....	29
	Rejecting the tyranny of the majority .....	29
	The United States of America and the common good .....	31
	Denmark, the pandemic and the community spirit .....	32
	Democracy, migrations and the common good.....	33
VI.	CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	34
VII.	ANNEX I.....	39
VIII.	ANNEX II.....	40

## I. INTRODUCTION

Both common good and social justice are familiar concepts to the Triglav Circle. The report of the United Nations Seminar on Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Social Progress, which is at the origin of the Circle, has a section entitled Self-interest and Common Good.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the concept of common good was routinely used in debates and statements and, on occasions, further explored. Notably, at a meeting held in Harvard, Massachusetts, in 2004, the Circle discussed the common good in relation with the topic Meaning of Life and Purpose of Society.<sup>2</sup> As to social justice, Poverty and Social Justice is the first of the six “concerns” that define the mission of the Triglav Circle. Particularly during the first decade of this century, a number of meetings were devoted to this subject.<sup>3</sup>

The convening of a meeting at the beginning of 2021 on these two concepts – common good and social justice – seen as inseparable, was a logical follow-up of the first “Zoom” meeting of the Circle held in July 2020 on Harmony with Nature. The growing and threatening disharmony of humankind with nature, notably evidenced by global warming, is linked to other crises, including the Covid pandemic and the rise of inequalities and various forms of deprivation. The “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor” have to be heard, said Pope Francis in his encyclical letter *Laudato S’i*.<sup>4</sup> And one should add widespread violence, insecurity and growing contempt of many governments for human rights. All these crises are putting into question the foundations of modern civilization. Could the notion of common good, with its material, moral and spiritual exigencies, provide the intellectual and political framework that is so urgently needed to guide corrective public and private policies and actions at all levels?

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<sup>1</sup> The report of this seminar was published by the United Nations (Sales No.E.95.IV2) and submitted to the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in March 1995. The section on Self-interest is given below in Annex II.

<sup>2</sup> See the Triglav website: Activities, Gatherings, Harvard, Mass; March 2004, Meaning of Life and Purpose of Society: Essential Dimensions of Morality.

<sup>3</sup> Triglav website; see in particular Activities, Special Events, Cambridge, Mass, 15-17 September 2005, seminar conveyed with the Harvard-Yenching Institute and the Friedrich Hebert Foundation: The Moral and political Foundation for Social Justice. See also, Activities, Gatherings, Harvard, Mass, 16-17 December 2005, Human Flourishing and Social Justice.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato S’i* On Care for Our Common Home, Encyclical Letter, 2015, The World Among Us Press, Frederick, Maryland, USA

In the note *Proposed Themes and Questions* circulated prior to this meeting three points were made.

- The first was a definition of the common good: The common good, at least in the Western world where the concept originated (notably from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas) is what is necessary for a group of individuals, from a few to the whole of humanity, to form and keep a “community” or “Polis.” Its maintenance implies the free but effective participation of all individuals, who, in doing so, become citizens, and the State, its leader, politicians, civil servants, public institutions, have a special responsibility. The common good requires a democratic form of government.<sup>5</sup>
- The second was that the common good is made of material and non-material goods. Material goods include equal access to all the goods and services traditionally provided by a welfare state as well as equal enjoyment of public goods such as clean air, water, and an overall healthy environment. Non-material goods range from reciprocal trust between the governed and their government, respect for human rights by public and private authorities, awareness and practice of their duties by the citizens, to civility, dialogue rather than confrontation in all social interactions, and the search for equilibrium between different interests. For many proponents of the common good, of Christian obedience or not, non-material goods have a spiritual dimension that shape, orient and sustain the implementation of the whole concept seen as both a necessity and an ideal.
- The third was that the common good tends to be invoked, analyzed and debated when events and changes, specific to a country, a region, or the globe, are threatening it. Calls for its restoration ensue. This was the case in Europe when the full dimensions and consequences of the industrial revolution unfolded and when the catastrophic World War I provoked the rise of two totalitarian ideologies, fascism and communism. During those years, the Catholic Church rediscovered the common good and started to elaborate its “social doctrine,” philosophers, notably Jacques Maritain, created “personnalisme” and both had a role in the emergence

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<sup>5</sup> This definition was largely inspired by the writings of Francois Flahaut, in particular his article in *Etudes*, 2013/6, pages 773-783. Available in English on Cairn International.

immediately after World War II of the institutions that became the European Union. In the last ten or fifteen years, the common good has again become a subject of interest in the Western world. The main reason for this renaissance is certainly the magnitude, diversity and apparent intractability of the various crises engulfing the world. The current pandemic is the most recent and has links with the other ongoing crises. In today's dire circumstances, making steps towards the realization of the "universal common good" advocated by Aristotle is urgently needed.

The statements and the comments made during this one-day event are reported below. It is hoped that this report will stimulate further reflections and exchanges within and beyond the Triglav Circle.

## **II. VIEWS ON THE COMMON GOOD AS A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

### ***Address common "bads" rather than an elusive common good***

It would be better to refer to common "bads" rather than the common good. For three reasons: the notion of a common is flawed, dangerous and, in any case, inappropriate today. The concept is flawed because it rests on the false assumptions that people are virtuous and that what is common and good for all can be identified and be the acceptable basis for life communities. The notion of a common good is dangerous because any public power pretending to know it tends to impose it, at the cost of the pluralism which is the essence of democracy. And it is inappropriate in today's world where societies are not only "Hobbesian" but either totalitarian or often divided by race, religion, education, social class and political or philosophical views.

For these reasons, addressing the concrete problems of a society is preferable to the pursuance of some elusive common good. Fear is a powerful motivation for drawing people together in order to eliminate or at least control a common bad and to make them accept an authority capable of doing so. That fear, rather than a shared conception of a positive common good, would unite us and allow us to face the future. And today, if societies are divided they are also threatened by common "bads," notably pandemics and global warming, which

have scientifically established causes and remedies. Corrective measures ought therefore to be broadly accepted and implemented.

Yet, the example of the United States shows that this is not the case. Facts are denied. Fanciful theories of the origins of the problems are propagated. Elected officials propagate lies. Positions on one side of the political spectrum are cast in such a way that dialogues and reaching compromises are becoming impossible. What to do in such circumstances? Democratic institutions are no longer functioning and alternatives are not acceptable. All easy solutions, such as limitations on the freedom of speech, are contrary to the essence of democracy, which is the toleration of different views, however outrageous. This dilemma is not resolvable at present.

An alternative, it was pointed out, is to be found in an ethic of love. Consider the issue of the environment and of nature. Is it an ethic of fear or an ethic of love that will enable humankind to save what we call the environment? Motivated by an ethic of fear, one finds some solutions to specific problems, and that's important, but not enough. To see the whole, to understand fully that humankind is part of nature, to comprehend the connections between our treatment of animals and our relations with fellow human beings, to design and implement policies that will save Mother Earth, an ethic of love is necessary. Not as a strategy to be abandoned once problems are "solved," but as a continuing source of inspiration, wonder, and action.

This is certainly the way individuals should relate to nature. All human beings should try to reach harmony with nature in their own lives. But this ethic should not be imposed upon citizens in a republic. An ethic, the moral position of individuals, does not necessarily turn into the position of a political power. Political ethics are not simply extensions of individual ethics. They require understanding of different points of view.

There are limits to that understanding, to the tolerance that the political power in a democratic country should have for outrageous or patently false positions taken by its citizens. With regard to climate change, for example, certain views, certain denials should be denounced.

The use of the "we" and the "them" is problematic in the context of a political community. It denotes an accepted inequality and a form of social breakdown.

Those who are on top of the social ladder have to be very careful in what they think of “them” and how they appear to “them.” Some elites in our societies are self-righteous. Ideally, in a democracy, there should not be “we” and “them.”

It is indeed true that self-rightness is sometimes associated with discourses on an ethic of love, or compassion, or empathy. But that does not have to be. The work of Paul Ricoeur is in this regard of great interest. In *Amour et Justice*, Ricoeur presents love as the custodian of justice, as justice is always in danger of falling at the level of the self-serving calculation – the *do ut des* (I give so that you will give). Love protects justice against this mistake by proclaiming “I give because you already gave to me.” With this same perspective, Ricoeur proposes to replace the traditional vertical political relationship domination/subordination with a political theology promoting living together in just institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Paul Ricoeur also wrote a book on recognition in which he contends that there are different levels of recognition. At the first level is the “I recognize you as a human being.” At another level, which he calls mutual recognition and can go all the way to love, there is a deep interaction; things can begin to happen, there is a gain, there is a plus. Such mutual recognition is a gift to all the parties.<sup>7</sup>

In the same vein, one should remember and meditate an expression common in Africa. Sounding like “bonuto,” it means “you are a person through another person,” and this is very close to the “mutual recognition” of Paul Ricoeur. One is a human being through another human being. It is in this fundamental relationship that one exists. On this foundation, many things can be added and debated, for instance on the type of community that “bonuto” implies, but it is a useful guidance.

It was also noted that most international agreements with concrete and positive effects, including those negotiated in the United Nations, are indeed addressing clearly identified problems that can be labeled common “bads.” This is the case for multilateral treaties on environmental issues as well as on

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Amour et Justice*, Editions Points, 2008, page 10

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la Reconnaissance*, Ed. Stock, Les Essais, 2004 ; In English, *The Course on Recognition*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

human rights. But the legal and ethical framework for these instruments is the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, texts which express the common good of humankind. Is it not the same for most democratic and republican governments? Don't they also need an ideal to orient their policies?

***The common good: an antidote to the neo-liberal ideology***

The common good, a central notion in the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, is also at the core of the work of the Ecumenical Center and the World Council of Churches. At stake is the overcoming of a situation the world has been driven into by the neo-liberal philosophy and social thinking. This philosophy, that became an ideology in the mid-eighties, turned relationships in society into an affair characterized by competition, by struggle, in particular through efforts in the name of the "market" to transform all social relationships into marketable goods. And that includes political power.

The common good tradition maintains that there is a primary relationship between human beings and society. In this tradition, society is not a construction through which people agree to live together. Rather, human beings are from their origin relational beings and social relationships entail mutual responsibility. The common good define some of these essential mutual relationships and responsibilities. Three of these relationships are essential for the future of our world.

- First: the recognition that human dignity is the central element of what constitutes the common good.
- Second: the satisfaction of all the needs which are essential to sustain human life. These include basic goods such as food, clothing and housing, and basic services such as education and health. There has been a strong tendency to make marketable these basic goods and services and to make their access dependent on competition. Putting interests against each other in this manner is a distortion of the original destination of society.
- Third, the common good encompasses peace, safety, protection of the environment, all public values and objectives that are not subject to competition in market societies.

In sum, the common good is an essential effort to return to or to create a society that allows all individuals to attain fulfillment in life.

This recollection that human beings are not inherently quarrelsome is today very welcome. There are actually many instances of people helping each other to overcome situations that looked hopeless. One may mention in this regard the recent book entitled *Humankind: A Hopeful History*.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to recall the commercialization of social relationships which is one of the features of globalization and which Karl Marx identified as a constitutive element of capitalism. Karl Marx developed the concept of “reification” to analyze the social relations of production within capitalism and then extended it to denounce the “commodification” of society.<sup>9</sup>

The continuing aggravation of inequalities is in the same logic as the commercialization of society. But it is all the more difficult to combat inequalities and the other consequences of neo-liberal ideology as the precepts of this ideology are incorporated in a network of multinational corporations that are running the world economy. In the absence of a mandated international public authority, these corporations are only accountable to their shareholders. Their contribution to the common good is a matter of choice, whereas given their power it should be an obligation. Governments are either their promoters and supporters or their powerless hosts.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The common good is social justice***

The concept of social justice is often reduced to a more equitable, or less unequal, distribution of economic benefits. Here, while recognizing the crucial importance of this distribution, social justice is taken as synonymous with justice, without qualifier i.e. justice, in all its distributive dimensions and as equality before the law. Justice, or social justice, means a just society, a society

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<sup>8</sup> Written by the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman, published in the Netherlands in September 2019 and subsequently in English, Bloomsbury, and in French, Le Seuil.

<sup>9</sup> He wrote, for example: “The things which until now had been communicated, but never exchanged, given, but never sold, acquired but never bought – virtue, love, conscience – all at last enter into commerce.” Cited in David Leopold, *Karl Marx, Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2015

<sup>10</sup> In October 2021 an agreement was signed by most members of the OECD - including the USA, China, India - instituting a tax of 15 per cent on all multinational companies with an annual revenue above 830 million dollars. The “GAFA” will of course be taxed. It is estimated that it will provide 150 billion dollars per year to the States where these companies operate. The tax should be in place in 2023. Source: Le Monde, 9 October 2021



“qui tient debout, qui est d’aplomb, qui ne va pas s’écrouler’.”<sup>11</sup> Social justice and the common good have therefore the same meaning. This is an intuitive vision of the common good.

Attempting to outline a more analytical definition of the common good, the choice here is to consider Articles One to Five of the declaration adopted on 26 August 1789 by about one thousand men who proclaimed themselves “representatives of the French people formed into a National Assembly.” These five Articles of the *Declaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* proclaim that the common good is to maintain the natural and inalienable rights of human beings, that is Liberty, Property, Safety and Resistance to Oppression.<sup>12</sup> There are three main reasons to appreciate and defend this definition of the common good.

- First: this definition reflects a social conception of liberty and freedom. It stresses the link between self and others, because Article 4 states that liberty is being able to do anything that does not harm others. And, that link existed before the elaboration of national institutions.
- Second: this same definition of the common good is both modest and ambitious. It is modest, because there is no mention of progress of Man or of Society. Ambitious, because the aim is to maintain something, a natural right, that belongs to all humanity. It is impossible to limit the

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<sup>11</sup> In *Amour et Justice* Ricoeur writes the following on the two key concepts of justice: “Le concept de distribution, pris dans sa plus grande extension, confère une base morale à la pratique sociale de la justice (vue) comme régulation des conflits (...) Quant à l’égalité, égalité arithmétique des droits, égalité proportionnelle d’avantages et charges dans un partage inégal, elle marque à la fois la force et les limites de l’idée la plus haute de justice. En effet, l’égalité des droits complétée par l’égalité des chances, est certainement source de cohésion sociale (...) Mais quel sorte de lien est-il ainsi institué entre les partenaires sociaux ? Ma suggestion est ici que le point le plus haut auquel puisse viser l’idéal de justice est celui d’une société où le sentiment de dépendance mutuelle – voire même de mutuel endettement – reste subordonné à celui de mutuel désintéressement. On remarquera à cet égard la formule frappante de Rawls « d’intérêt désintéressé » par laquelle il caractérise l’attitude de base des contractants dans la situation hypothétique du contrat originel. » Op. Cit. page 31.

<sup>12</sup> Declaration of Human and Civic Rights: Article 1: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good. Article 2: The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of Man. These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety and Resistance to Oppression. Article 3: The principle of any Sovereignty lies primarily in the Nation. No corporate body, no individual may exercise any authority that does not expressly emanate from it. Article 4: Liberty consists of being able to do anything that does not harm others; thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights. These bounds may be determined only by law. Article 5: The Law has the right to forbid only those actions that are injurious to society. Nothing that is not forbidden by Law may be hindered, and no one may be compelled to do what the Law does nor ordain. This translation is from the Conseil Constitutionnel de la République Française. One may note that in Article One the words “common good” are the translation of “l’utilité commune” in the French text.

enjoyment of this right within national borders and the judgments of lawmakers are clearly circumscribed by Article 5.

- Third: if it is not me, as a person, who puts limits on my freedom so as not to harm another person, only the nation to which I belong has the capacity to do it. The “nation,” according to this Declaration, will be persons that I have myself chosen as my representatives. This is a serious guarantee against abuses of power.

Our societies have obviously changed since 1789. But basic principles have not lost their relevance. What we have to do, all of us in our respective countries, is to think of the new or renewed institutions, laws, norms and processes made necessary by the passage of time. In this regard, a good source of inspiration is the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* issued by Pope Francis in October 2020. Two particularly important points ought to be mentioned.

It is indicated in this Letter that a realistic and inclusive social contract should also be a cultural contract, taking into account and respecting different views of the universe, different cultures and different ways of life in a society. Thus, since peace is a fundamental need at the same level as food or housing, and since peace is the result of social justice, in addition to the architecture for peace involving institutions from the commune to the nation and international organizations, there is room for a peace craft industry (an “*artisanat de la paix*”). This implies that each person has a contribution to make to promote peace and the common good. What is important for individual action is to overcome fear and, through a culture of dialogue and exchange, to communicate with persons who are different. Such culture will not, cannot erase conflicting views of the world or conflicting pursuits of legitimate interests. But, through patient efforts, it will enable humankind to overcome these conflicts.

The need to re-emphasize the social function of property is a second important point. This function is already mentioned in a number of constitutions, but renewed thinking on relationships between individual and legal entities should be undertaken. As the later are shaping the world of today, the question is how to ensure structurally a minimum of coherence in the action of the states, the transnational corporations and the non-governmental organizations for the

benefit of all the physical persons who remain the *ultima ratio* of any form of society. This has to be done keeping in mind the fundamental conclusion reached by Marcel Mauss in his work *Essai sur le Don* published in 1923: our social life, like in earlier types of societies, is moved beyond economic rationality by three words – *give, receive, return* – which express a mix of kindness of heart and desire for power (“volonté de puissance”).

### ***Respecting and listening to the poor: an approach to a just society***

The movement *A.T.D. Fourth World* offers an example of concrete work for the common good and social justice.<sup>13</sup> Founded in France in 1950 by a Catholic priest, Joseph Wresinski, the *Fourth World* took its name from the observation that deep and chronic poverty in the midst of affluence represented a world in itself, cutting across the at the time prevalent division of First/ “developed” West, Second/ socialist, communist East and Third/ “developing” South. Assigned to serve in a shanty town (“bidonville”) outside of Paris where the poor were “parked. Wresinski, a fervent admirer of the recently adopted Universal Declaration of Human Rights, saw extreme poverty as a violation of human rights. He decided that the first thing to do was to know better the people around him, to ask them what their most pressing needs were. Their answer was a library and a chapel. Done, this was the first step to make the poor their own agents in the movement towards overcoming poverty and achieving the common good. The next step for “Père Joseph” was to draw some other persons to help in this enterprise.

Sixty years later, the *Fourth World Movement* is active in more than twenty countries. It has a volunteer corps of over 400 individuals who have dedicated themselves to working with the poor rather than doing things for them. They do not give money or food to the poor. In small teams of four to six, they live near pockets of extreme poverty and meet the poor themselves. By this living together, the poor are encouraged to say what will help them in their lives. For example, the volunteers go with them when they engage with social agencies and help them to be understood and respected. Also, the movement has attempted from the beginning to make known to the world what they have learned themselves through publications and participation in the work of

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<sup>13</sup>The original name of the movement, in French, is *Aide a Toute Détresse, le Quart Monde*.

international organizations, notably the United Nations. For decades, it has had consultative status in the United Nations. When the *Fourth World* speaks in this kind of forum, poor people themselves have a voice.

The movement itself is organized in a radical democratic way. There is no top-down structure. The small teams are largely independent. The leadership of the *Fourth World* is chosen through a consensus process. Every three or four years an international team of three/four persons is chosen after representatives of the poor, of the volunteers and of the “allies” meet to discuss the needs of the movement and the leadership it should have.

The *Fourth World* was not established with the intent to change the policy of a country on poverty. Originally, and this is still the case, the intent was to share the lives of those in distress, listening to them, respecting them, and helping them to be respected. But, providing policy advice at local, national and international levels has emerged and gained force and credibility from this empathy and proximity, and from the total harmony between the means, i.e. the motives and actions of the volunteers, and the end, i.e. the common good of small and large communities.

Points made on the importance of language should be mentioned here. First is the famous biblical precept “Thou should not steal.” A French translation of the same precept is “Tu ne commettras pas de rapt.” This is very different: a “rapt” is to deprive somebody from his or her liberty. The English translation is very... “bourgeois.” Second point: the word “poor” is a very “poor” word. In Québécois, a common and much better expression is “les plus démunis du monde.” This evokes people deprived of their “ammunitions,” of their defenses, people who are powerless. There is a similar connotation in the word “détresse” of the A.T.D; Fourth World. Third point: one should say, as Calvin did, “my neighbor needs my help.” Therefore I must find out what my neighbor needs. I should ask “what do you need?”, and not, as is commonly done, “what does my neighbor need from me?”. This is perfectly in line with the work of A.T.D Fourth World and with the idea that the maintenance of the common good implies the free participation of all individuals who, in doing so, become engaged citizens.

### ***A step by step progress towards global citizenship***

There is a strong need for the common good to be reintroduced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A vision of global citizenship, based on the classic values that citizenship entails, is called for as the challenges facing humankind are mounting. To mention only the most obvious, these are pandemics, climate change, and exploitation of nature, migrations, and inequalities. Given the impressive scientific and technological means presently available, the inability to overcome these problems is a paradox, a dilemma.

Using the distinction made in the introductory note between the material and the immaterial dimensions of the common good, this paradox manifests itself in the material dimensions, but the immaterial part is determinant as regards our ability to overcome it. Needed is a sense of citizenship locally, nationally and globally strong enough to mobilize the forces of good. In the past, this was the task and the privilege of a small elite sharing status, knowledge and power. Today, at least in the Western world, these conditions no longer prevail and the central question is the development in our own society of a widely shared sense of loyalty and respect for common values. What exactly are these values? Which institutions can embody them and transmit them from our generation to the next? And how can a society project and protect that spirit in the wider international community?

A fundamental change would be to achieve a joint understanding of reality, within which agreements could flourish and respect for citizenship and civility prevail. Since the last few years, different views of the world have expressed themselves without interaction, as if there were different “realities,” as if people were living in different “bubbles.” We live at a time of fake news, alternative facts, competing ideologies and lack of social disintegration. In such situations, restoring citizenship and civility is a tall order. It would be fruitful, however, to approach the issue of the common good as a duty to protect, preserve and develop a democratic society based on respect for human rights, the rule of law, and a sound administration. Governments have the main responsibility for this critical task and, today, they benefit from the help of a

very active civil society, including through the work of a variety of movements, associations and foundations.

Regarding the need to create a real international community able to promote and implement universal values, one should not neglect intellectual achievements of the past nor existing institutions. Debates on the common good have gone for centuries and there is a renewed interest, here and there, today. At the regional level, The European Union and the Council of Europe were created to promote the common good, although the terms do not appear in their mandates. The United Nations and the other institutions of the United Nations system are essential building blocks for world governance made necessary by globalization. International law and the international courts, notably the International Criminal Court, are also building blocks that should be nurtured and used. All can play a fundamental role in making a broad and critical mass of understanding that the common good is of vital interest for humankind.

The likelihood of such understanding may seem very remote in the present conflicted and dangerous state of the world. And the United Nations in particular is often accused of powerlessness. But a long familiarity with the diplomatic scene of the United Nations leads to the conviction that the mere existence of a meeting place where all countries, big and small, are represented and where people can talk to one another with some understanding of the topic in the agenda, is far from negligible. Even though there will often be no agreement on what to do, meeting and talking is significant. It opens an opportunity for a dialogue and for a framework within which different opinions can be expressed. And, with patience, results are obtained in some domains, for example the protection of the environment. Such agreements may be motivated by enlightened self-interest, or by a sense of common interest. They are not yet expressing a shared perception of a universal common good, but they are steps in the right direction.

This possibility of incremental progress towards a global common good through institutions like the European Union and the United Nations was questioned. Yes, the European Union partly succeeded because at the time of its formation

participating countries agreed on their common economic good. But the contours of this common economic good are now challenged and agreement has not extended to other facets of a European common good which is not separable from the global common good. As to the United Nations, it is constrained by having at its heart both national sovereignty and, through the veto in the Security Council, the domination of the main powers. What is needed is a change in the values underlying our institutions.

### ***A global common good through a moral and spiritual transformation***

The need for a global vision of the common good is overwhelming. Humankind is confronted with a pandemic, with global warming and other consequences of the mistreatment of nature, with the mounting of various forms of violence and with the long-standing structural problems of a world economy based on the principles of unregulated global capitalism. All these problems and crises are linked, and there is a need for a global approach to social justice, as much as for peace or the search for a renewed harmony with nature.

It is also evident that such global approach requires effective global institutions. At present, the United Nations, which has a central role to play, is limited in what it can do to define and even more so to implement a universal common good. The challenge this organization is confronted with is enormous as the world has to construct some form of political oneness in the midst of conflicts and diversity of cultures and beliefs too often perceived as a threat rather than a source of enrichment. And there are no “quick fixes” to “reform” institutions such as the United Nations. The values guiding its members and its civil servants have to be in conformity with the ideal it represents. A detailed proposal for a truly reformed United Nations has recently been published.<sup>14</sup>

As all efforts for the emergence of a universal common good are connected, from each individual to a community, a nation and the whole world, it is appropriate to evoke the philosophy under which a particular community, the Baha’i, lives and works. With its 150 years of existence, the Baha’i community

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<sup>14</sup> Augusto Lopez-Claros, Arthur L. Dahl, Maja Groff, *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 545 pages, 2020. Available at: [https://www-cambridge.org/core/book/global-governance\\_and-the-emergence-of-global-institutions-for-the-21st-century/AF7D40B152C4CBEDB310EC5F40866A59](https://www-cambridge.org/core/book/global-governance_and-the-emergence-of-global-institutions-for-the-21st-century/AF7D40B152C4CBEDB310EC5F40866A59).

has a unique form of governance, with no domination by the majority. Diversity is encouraged as much as possible in the democratic process. Crucial is the elaboration of the future of society and of the nature and purpose of life as a foundation for the common good. The Baha’I define the common good and social justice in terms of our common humanity as human beings.

The purpose of life is not simply to get rich or to maximize profit or power. Rather, it is to enable every human being to fulfill his or her purpose by contributing to the good of the whole. The Baha’I have their own environment organization. The contribution of this community to the text for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations was the following: “To acknowledge the oneness of the human family is not to call for uniformity or to relinquish the wide range of established systems of governance. A true appreciation for the oneness of humanity contains with it the appreciation of diversity. What is needed today is the central consensus that while preserving the value systems and cultures around the world, a consensus on a set of common values and principles that can attract the support of every nation is imperative.” The mission of the Triglav Circle is to contribute to the emergence of this consensus.

### **III. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMMON GOOD**

#### ***From the industrial revolution to the digital revolution***

The industrial revolution, with the traumatic changes it brought in the lives of masses of people, was a huge rupture. People left their villages where everything was familiar and a lot was shared and moved to cities. There, they had been members of an extended family and of a community. Here, they became individuals without bearings or anchors.

Taking the example of France, industrial workers were abandoned by the Catholic Church. By the issuance in 1891 of his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII was accepting the republic as a legitimate form of government, denouncing the flaws of both Marxism and Capitalism and establishing the foundations of the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. The



influence of *Rerum Novarum* was enormous and long lasting in the intellectual and political circles of Europe. Marc Sangnier and *Le Sillon*, Emmanuel Mounier and *Esprit* promoted Social Catholicism, a movement which became a major force not only in France but in Western Europe in the form of Christian Democratic Parties.

Workers and employees, however, were few in these parties. In France, the great majority of them were engaged in the communist and socialist parties and unions. The bridge between the Catholic Church and the working class that Leo XIII had constructed was quickly destroyed. In 1910 Pope Pius X condemned *Le Sillon*. Overall, during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Catholic Church kept the image inherited from the “Restoration” that had followed the revolution and Napoleon: an institution on the side of the “possédants.”

In the same period, extending from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a majority of workers found themselves dependent for their livelihood on increasingly large companies with increasingly complex structures and lines of authority. “Shareholders” and “managers” replaced identifiable “patrons” with whom relations could be often antagonistic but kept a human dimension. “Businesses” replaced factories. Heads of “human resources” replaced heads of personnel. Thanks to political parties of the left and to the actions of trade unions the right to strike was recognized, working conditions improved and so did living conditions. The welfare state gave to all a sense of security. The proletariat became the working class.

To an extent, political parties and unions became substitutes for traditional communities. Politics in France were messy, sometimes dramatic, as were the change of republic in 1958 and the quasi revolution of 1968. But the administration was efficient, the economy was dynamic and the social fabric was solid. Sports, especially team sports, attendance of sports events, notably competitive football games, and interest in star-players bettered the lives of many people. Since the end of World War II and until the 1990s the French society was standing on its feet. Like most democracies, it had two essential features of a nation shaped by the common good: liberty and a sufficient social cohesion.

In the last few decades, a digital revolution has been transforming the whole world. As was the industrial revolution, it is driven by scientific and technological innovations and one can imagine that the steam engine and the first airplane were met with the same mix of awe and fear with which the present digital revolution and artificial intelligence are presently perceived. In France, as elsewhere, there are people who are the agents and beneficiaries of this revolution and people who suffer from it or are simply its passive witnesses. There are alarming signs of the time, such as the growing lack of trust of people in their political institutions and the related rise of extremist ideas and movements. And there are positive developments, notably the many forms of solidarity prompted by the current pandemic and the strong involvement of the civil society in local, national and global issues, including for restoring the health of our severely damaged planet.

### ***Civilizations and nations are mortal***

This is a time to read again Arnold Toynbee or the more recent essay of Jared Diamond<sup>15</sup> and to ask ourselves why civilizations go under. We are in a situation where societies able to define and practice the common good are likely to survive, whereas societies that are unable to do so risk collapse.

It is useful to refer to books such as *Global Public Goods* published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2003. Societies can easily produce private goods, not only in abundance but in excess. Suffice to consider the number of brands of cereal that are displayed in supermarkets, or of toothpastes offered in pharmacies. Much more difficult is the production and the distribution of public goods such as those required to control pandemics. A critical point brought by the UNDP study was the issue of “free-riders”, that is people who make sure that society pays for things that benefit them or pass on to society the cost of the “bads” they produce. The examples of chemical factories offloading their pollutants into rivers are, among others, well known examples. We should concentrate on who is contributing to the public good(s) and also on who is contributing to the public “bad(s)”. A “balance sheet” on who pays what is not a trivial matter.

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<sup>15</sup>*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, by Jared Diamond, December 2004

Collective decisions require structures and processes for global governance that are still missing. The global conferences conveyed under the aegis of the United Nations in the 1990s produced a whole body of definitions and best practices in domains such as the environment, the emancipation of women, reproductive rights and many others. Today, it would be very important for societies and for the world as a whole to define as clearly as possible the desirable common good.

For such a task, the principle of subsidiarity, which is the link between the common good and diversity, would be very useful. Subsidiarity means that decisions have to be taken by those who are as near as possible to the problem, or, in another formulation, as near as possible to the citizens. In other words: if there is a problem, you deal with it yourself; if you cannot cope with it, you call for help. In Latin, the “*subsidium*” are the reserve troops. So, you call in the help of the other, but to help, not to take over. This is where the European Union, which made subsidiarity one of its founding principles, got it wrong. With its true meaning, subsidiarity has an interesting intellectual history. It was first formulated by the Protestant Synod of Hamden in 1571. Then it disappeared to be revived in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, particularly in the context of labor relations and intermediate bodies. Then it somehow took root in the European Culture.

Reference was made to the UN World Conferences of the 1990s and their abundant production of norms and principles. Why is it so difficult to keep those basic norms and principles alive today? Several elements of response were given.

—The United Nations is good at elaborating standards, norms and principles, and not so good at implementing them. Take for example the very complete and excellent Agenda 21 adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. If the essential of it had been implemented the world would not be on the brink of major global catastrophes today. But the implementation of Agenda 21 was left to Member States with only vague monitoring from the UN and very little was done. One reason for this failure is a globalization process under the neo-liberal credo

which includes an unlimited influence for lobbies with equally unlimited resources. Mother Earth and the destitute and powerless of our world do not have such lobbies.

- This globalization process was said to be threatened by nationalism, as if the global approach of the 1990s was past. But what we pejoratively call nationalism is a healthy reaction to an economic system that benefits corporations and people at the very top of the income and wealth ladder. In the USA as in most countries, democratic or autocratic, the middle-class stagnates or regresses and poverty in its various forms rises. Another driving force of nationalism is the corruption of many political systems and elites. Nationalism is the best protection against transparency. Those who serve themselves in the public purse are using nationalism to remain unaccountable.
- Not all the conferences that the United Nations organized in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century failed in the sense of having limited results and no follow-up. Those that succeeded, albeit with great problems of implementation, as was noted with Agenda 21 of the “Earth Summit,” were conferences on the environment and even more obviously conferences on women’s conditions and rights. They succeeded because they amplified and gave an added legitimacy and resonance to already strong social movements. For the environment, among the concluded agreements are two particularly important treaties on biodiversity and on climate change (the Paris Agreement). The United Nations is not responsible for the limited implementation of these agreements. For the situation of women, much remains to be achieved and there are alarming signs of regression here and there, but overall progress is undeniable.
- Conversely, world conferences that were at odds with the spirit of the time or obscured by extraordinary events, failed. The World Summit for Social Development, conveyed in Copenhagen and inspired by a social-democratic and interventionist vision of a desirable world order, took place in March 1995 when the neo-liberal revolution had already triumphed. It was a success in terms of its attendance and the richness of the text it adopted, but no serious follow-up was accepted and its

recommendations were quickly reduced to an “elimination” of poverty by the free interplay of “market forces” in a globalized economy.

- The World Conference on Human Rights which took place in Vienna in 1993 is another example of failure. The end of the Cold War was still celebrated as the “end of history.” “Democracy” was seen as progressing inexorably around the world. In this euphoric atmosphere, several non-governmental organizations were against the convening of a conference. They feared that few governments would support a reinforcement of the means given to the United Nations to check the observance of human rights treaties by its Member States. Not only was this fear confirmed, but it proved to be a struggle to keep what had already been achieved in the past in the final text.

### ***Historical cycles and dynamics of the common good***

Like all forms of life on this earth, human communities go through periods of growth, maturity and decline. This observation, probably as ancient as humanity, gave rise in different civilizations to different understandings of time and history, and different theories and predictions of varying fanciful precision. Considering only Western civilization, Plato saw the course of history returning upon itself in 72,000 years. For Polybius, the history of states was a circular movement repeating itself with no predictable ending. And, jumping to modern times, John Bagot Glubb wrote that empires were consistently going through a cycle of seven “ages,” the first being “outburst,” followed by “conquest,” “commerce,” “affluence,” “intellect” and then “decadence” and “collapse.”

The common good, elaborated by Aristotle and Christianized by Thomas Aquinas, is also an ancient concept in Western culture, but its understanding has evolved considerably over time. The messages of Pope Francis on this subject have an echo well beyond Catholic and even Christian circles.

Comparable views of the common good are enounced by intellectuals of very different persuasions, for example Noam Chomsky and Robert Reich. At the risk of oversimplification, it can be asserted that the present resonance of the concept of common good emanates from the humanism led by Erasmus, the Reform launched by Luther, the Enlightenment and the American and French revolutions of the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These intellectual breakthroughs and

events “secularized” the notion of common good – under the label “general interest” – and the vision of history. Putting humankind in charge of its future, they opened the door to modernity.

From then on, it makes sense to look for relations between historical cycles and components of the common good. American history provides a good example. It has easily identifiable periods, from the birth of the nation to the Trump presidency, and including the Civil War, the progressive era of Theodore Roosevelt, the Great Depression, the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt, World War II and the civil rights movement of the sixties. Varying in length from less than 10 years to around 20 years, these periods are marked by advances and regressions in key elements of the common good, notably social justice and social cohesion. Advances and regressions for these two elements and their components do not always coincide with the identified periods. But, overall, at least for social justice and its essential components including a reasonably equitable distribution of wealth, income and opportunities and non-discrimination for race and gender, overall progress could be noted until the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1978, the presidency of Ronald Reagan ushered a new period in the history of the United States, and of the world as a whole. The unregulated globalization of the economy, initiated under the presidency of Richard Nixon, facilitated by the digital revolution and placed under the motto “nothing is wrong with greed”, made global capitalism and global finance “the only game in town” and a power above all control and accountability. Inequalities increased. Poverty also increased in the United States and other affluent countries. Societies became divided into those who are “in” and those who are or feel excluded. With the Trump presidency, social cohesion was battered and weakened to the point of fear of shredding the social fabric of the United States as a nation. At the same time, evidence of the damages inflicted on the planet since the industrial revolution mounted and policies for controlling this dramatic trend remained tragically insufficient.

This period in the history of the United States is already much longer than the previous periods labeled as parts of historic cycles. Will it continue with its

negative consequences for the common good and for the basic tenets of democracy in spite of and beyond the presidency of Joseph Biden? Will it be followed by a renaissance of the spirit of this nation or by a dictatorship? Is the end of history, not in the sense predicted by Francis Fukuyama but in the unthinkable sense of the end of humankind, a risk to be considered? Such questions have never been raised seriously in modern history. They put a huge responsibility on all of us and particularly on those with economic, financial or political power.

The described cycles are not *strict sensu* historical laws but observed patterns. And, since this vast historical panorama was essentially inspired by events in the United States, it could still be asserted that the arc of history is now leaning towards a world effort for a resurgence of the notion of common good.<sup>16</sup>

Ideas and practices considered positive for 20 or 30 years often need to be changed. In that sense also, the view that there are regular cycles in social life can be supported. Here is an example taken from the French political system. The election of the head of state, the President, by direct universal suffrage decided by General de Gaulle in 1962, has shown to be a very good thing. But now, there should be a “revolution,” a complete turn in the physical sense. For nations as well as for individuals, there are cycles, and France would be better served if the President was to be elected by indirect universal suffrage. In the world of today, direct universal suffrage is not the sign of democratic life and social justice.

Question: Would you say that today referenda are a valid form of government and a legitimate expression of people’s sovereignty?

Answer: It depends. Experience has shown the following problem: Do you answer the question which is posed? Or do you answer having in mind the individual who posed the question? Types of electoral systems, referenda, those are difficult issues. All in all, the most important is that a country be governed by several persons and that the head has links with the citizens. Indirect suffrage is the best to cool down passions, to introduce moderation in

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<sup>16</sup> For the notion of “arc of history” see the report on the first Zoom meeting of the Triglav Circle, *Harmony with Nature*.

political decisions. The common good cannot be decided by an individual alone. This is true for the State and also for private companies. How to form the “community” of individuals who will then elaborate the contours of the common good? This is the issue to be thought through.

#### **IV. PRIVATE AND PUBLIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMON GOOD**

##### ***Private enterprises and the common good***

Following the issuance of the encyclical letter *Laudato S’I* by Pope Francis the Vatican has taken initiatives to create conditions for enhancing the contribution of the private economic sector to the common good. One of these initiatives was the convening of a series of conferences with participants from different regions and different types of enterprises and corporations. The reflections that follow are based on a few years’ involvement in this effort.

Participants were aware of the notion of the common good presented in *Laudato SI’* as “a central and unifying principle of social ethics” and defined as “the sum of those conditions in social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.” Underlying this principle “is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of subsidiarity.” In the discussions, however, the common good was simply taken as the overcoming of two “fragilities,” i.e. poverty and the ecological crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Participants were also aware that “integral ecology” is the central concept advocated in *Laudato S’I* and that environmental, economic, social and cultural ecologies are components of this integral ecology. An economic ecology, instead of being centered on economic growth, would appeal “to a broader vision of reality” and would require “a form of humanism capable of bringing

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<sup>17</sup>*Laudato SI*, Op. Cit. Chapter Four, Integral Ecology, Section IV. The Principle of the Common Good, paragraphs 156 and 157.



together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision.” Such humanism would include “more sober lifestyles” in “technologically advanced societies” and would be based on “the principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods.” Rather than stifling human creativity, this humanism would redirect it, would reorient human entrepreneurship and energy towards new ideals of progress.<sup>18</sup>

There was no expressed disagreement with these far-reaching normative principles. It can even be stated that a majority of the participants sincerely adhered to a doctrine which is in the continuity of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. Creating social justice in a balanced and integrated ecological system is a goal shared by men and women of good sense and good will. And, regarding the concrete implementation of these principles, there were some interesting discussions and openings.

The already well-established concepts and practices of social economy, solidarity economy, social capital, social entrepreneurship and social enterprises were debated.<sup>19</sup> Social enterprises, that is those enterprises, particularly of small and middle size, that seek simultaneously profit, positive social impact and environmental sustainability were considered the most useful instruments to put into operation the moral and political precepts outlined in *Laudato Si'*. For the private economic sector in general, a recommendation which was accepted was to establish an “ethical council” in each enterprise to evaluate the impact of decisions on social justice and the environment not only at the end of the production process but at the inception phase.

Notwithstanding such agreements, these conferences in the Vatican illustrate the difficulty in rendering operational ideas and principles that are at odds with prevalent views and interests. The corporate culture is still shaped by the neo-liberal ideology that has dominated the world since the mid-1980s. Very few governments are providing to alternative models such as social enterprises the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, Chapter Four, Integral Ecology, Section I, Environmental, Economic and Social Ecology, paragraph 141.

<sup>19</sup> The OECD and the European Union are doing important work on Social Enterprises and the Social and Solidarity Economy. See also the European Social Enterprise Monitor (ESEM) for its annual survey of social enterprises in Europe.

fiscal, financial, legal and administrative help that would enable them to make a significant “dent” in the prevalent economic system. One reason is the *de facto* subordination of public authorities to the influence of powerful lobbies, a situation reflecting an unhealthy relation between politics and economics. “Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy. Today, in view of the common good, there is an urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life.”<sup>20</sup>

Such a dialogue between politics and economics should take place at all levels of a society and of the world, from the local to the global. For “ordinary” actors in the private economic sector, as for all members of a community, the challenge is double: do the best for the common good, at one’s level, because everything is connected and everything, however small, counts—this means resisting the temptation of seeing one’s actions as futile – and, at the same time, resist the temptation to “give up” on levels of decision and action – national, regional, global – that are “too far,” too “out of reach”. Those with political, financial, economic power have special responsibilities and are accountable. The “global commons” will not be saved without global and enforceable political agreements.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Management of a common good by a public local authority***

A personal professional experience in a French local public authority operating on the shores of Lake Lemman, between Geneva and Evian, illustrates the search for the common good at a concrete level. The mission of this local authority is the comprehensive and concerted management of the water and aquatic environments in a watershed. In order to achieve good water and environmental conditions, an action programme with four objectives is

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<sup>20</sup>*Laudato SI'*, op. cit. paragraph 189.

<sup>21</sup>“The twenty-first century, while maintaining systems of governance inherited from the past, is witnessing a weakening of the power of nation states chiefly because the economic and financial sectors, being transnational, tends to prevail over the political. Given this situation it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments and empowered to impose sanctions (...) There is urgent need of a true world political authority.” *Laudato SI'* op. cit. paragraph 175.

implemented: management of aquatic environments, improving water quality, preservation of water resources, and prevention of flood risks.

The watershed comprises public goods provided by nature: Water and aquatic environments are essential for biological life; they are intrinsically necessary for natural functions and living beings. They are also *Res communis*, “things” that by their essence of public goods cannot be appropriated; they belong to everyone, are accessible and usable by everyone; in the watershed, there is free flow of water and free movements of species.

In fact, these common or public goods are not so common. They are coveted. There are water rights, user rights, fishing rights and property rights. In France, local residents own most of the non-navigable waterways. There are also concepts of *Res nullius*, this “thing” without a master but which is nevertheless appropriable, and *Res propria*, a “thing” that has no legal owner.

Thus, in this particular watershed, which hosts “Evian water,” there is a large element of “privatization” of public goods and there is a risk of “commodification” of water and “mercantilization” of water services. The task of the public local authority is to reconcile these competing interests and needs, and to make them compatible with the general interest. This is done in particular through a committee for a global concerted management (“gestion globale et concertée”) that invites regularly around a table all the interested parties. Sometimes compromises are difficult to reach, particularly when the rights of the users collide with the rights of nature, but progress is steady and achievements are significant. Notably, public drinking water and sanitation services have been put in place and four management plans are operating. They concern water resources on the scale of the watershed, flood risk prevention, wetlands, and sediments.

Extrapolating from this local experience, a number of general questions arise: Is the preservation of water resources to serve the common good becoming a universal goal? Are there societies, cultures, communities in which the management of water and aquatic environments guarantee the preservation of these common goods for their intrinsic qualities and not mainly for their use?

What may happen when effects of climate change worsen the scarcity of this resource? How will humankind face water shortages? How will the needs of other living “things” be considered?

***The state as an entrepreneur for common goods and the common good***

It would be a good idea to replace the words “public good” by the words “common good.” As we have seen with the question of water, public goods and common goods are often interchangeable. The use of common good, for example for water, which is something that is truly common, takes off the kind of stigma that often is attached to the notion of “public.” And in a related matter, the question of “common” versus “private,” the extent to which the “market” has already moved is often underestimated. Those that pay only lip service to the impact of their activities on environmental and social issues are now doing much worse on the international market than their “virtuous” competitors.

The other facet of this progress is the risk of “impact washing,” that is the fear that doing the proper thing is followed by the neglect of its impact on the ground in terms of the benefits that the people or nature gained. A response to that is to go back to public authorities. There are today reflections on the state as entrepreneur, for example in the work of the economist Mariana Mazzucato. She explains the role of government as an actor in the private sector. One could say that to arrive at the common good the state, which makes a lot of interventions for the common good (from the first computer to, for example, the electric car), could and ought to play a role in investing in goods for the common good, in the market, as a state. In so doing, it would re-appropriate the term entrepreneur. Language matters. It is important to re-appropriate some of these words used when discussing the roles of the public and the private sectors.

**V. IV. DEMOCRACY AND THE COMMON GOOD**

### ***Plato, Shoeki and Pigou***

It was recalled that the political regimes identified by Plato, in a descending order, were aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. Not only is democracy not the ideal regime, but it is not inherently stable and tends to degenerate into an anarchy leading to tyranny. The reason is that the people, “demos,” only interested in their freedom and deprived of wisdom and knowledge, are unable to practice the Golden Rule. This basic ethic of reciprocity is fundamentally the same in all religions.

The book *Animal Court, A Political Fable from Old Japan*, written in the XVIII century by Ando Shoeki, is today relevant. In its most famous chapter, all animals have a conference and conclude that among all creatures in the world the worst are human beings because they are by far the species wasting the most energy. That led to a reference to Arthur Cecil Pigou who, in his *The Economy of Welfare* published in 1920 introduced the concept of externality and argued that negative externalities ought to be offset by taxes. This is still extremely relevant for democracies that are struggling to limit global warming and its disastrous consequences.

### ***Rejecting the tyranny of the majority***

What is the society I would like to see if I were a woman belonging to a religious or ethnic minority? This is how the common good would be defined by people placed behind the “veil of ignorance” imagined by Rawls. This is how we should approach the common good today.

Why this uncommon view? Because the world is now trapped in a sort of tyranny of the majority, often with strong connotations of bigotry. People assert that the state is the protector of a particular religion, or a particular ethnic majority. This has with adverse consequences for those who do not belong to this majority. This breakdown of the social contract is happening in different parts of the world, including in large countries with democratic institutions.

Turning now to the “deconstruction” of the common good presented in the Introductory Note, the first component is the material facet of the common

good, including the protection of the environment. It has been amply debated in the world conferences conveyed by the United Nations as well as in international treaties. It should still be amenable to a rational debate based on sound and strong evidence. The problem here is the distortion of facts and of the debate by people in power, including the media. Blunt lies are “officially” enounced and then perpetrated. As already noted the notion of “reality” today becomes blurred. And again, this extraordinary and alarming feature of our time is occurring not only in authoritarian regimes but in democracies.

The second, non-material component of the common good, presents perhaps an even greater challenge. All aspects of life in a society and in the world, , are open to subjective views and decisions if they are “qualitative,” and cannot be defined, debated and settled with the help of hard data and unquestionable facts.. They are attributable to the nature of culture politics, of traditions, and of philosophical and religious beliefs of people. They are domains where the imposition of majoritarian rule cannot be the basis for the identification of the common good. But, today, we are increasingly losing sight of the open society that came into being after World War II. What ought to be done?

Three efforts would be particularly necessary and important. First, the legitimacy of dissent has to be recognized. If “I”, living in a democracy, criticize the government, I am considered “anti-national.” This is the standard answer of those in power in many societies. Second, we should abjure all forms of violence in debates on these qualitative issues. Third, it should be recognized by everybody that the diversity of religious beliefs is a source of richness. And so are different traditions and cultures. Living in a community where people of several religions co-exist makes me a richer person. Diversity is a value in itself.

Thus, the common good has to be defined in such a manner that there is respect for diversity and minorities. Dictatorship of the majority is much more dangerous than dictatorship of the few, for it is more difficult to contest. Today, citizens of the world and of good will should get their inspiration from Voltaire, not from Rousseau. Hopefully, it will be possible to bring back the spirit of dialogue that was prevailing some twenty years ago on the international scene. An up-to-date global consensus on the common good is

needed. The world needs to have the kind of consensus on the non-material aspects of the common good that was prevailing in the 1990s on the material aspects.

The tyranny of the majority is an observation that resonates very much for somebody living in the United Kingdom. This country has a rich diversity of cultures and backgrounds. The United Kingdom is in many ways a multicultural country. Now, with the government led by Boris Johnson, instead of celebrating that diversity people are rejecting it. Rather than having dialogues, others are cast as enemies. And this is intentional. It is an instrument that is being used by manipulative and self-serving politicians. Awareness of this phenomenon which has been spreading since Donald Trump came to power is very important, as is the way to deal with it. A propos Trump, his four years in power have been incredibly destructive not only for the United States but for the whole world.

### ***The United States of America and the common good***

The destructive four years of the Trump presidency resulted from a long, carefully organized and generously financed process for the creation and dominance of a new brand of reactionary conservatism having little in common with the views held by the Republican party until the presidency of Reagan. To the apology of greed made by Reagan was added a systematic and outrageously simplistic rejection of anything which could be labeled «liberal» in American politics and society. This included, and still includes, not only economic, social and cultural rights but also civil and political rights which are the essence of liberalism. Trump captured this tide and added open contempt for facts, for the truth and for any semblance of morality.

The result is a frightening division of the country into two camps. The 44 million voters who brought Trump to power and who seem to be still longing for him, are, above all, “against.” They are against the “elites.” In a book titled *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson makes a graphic comparison of the Indian and the American caste systems.<sup>22</sup> They are against racial equality, against immigrants, against equity in general, against the rights of women when these rights contradict rules and prejudices of a religious origin. They are against policies to limit the

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<sup>22</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *CASTE, The Origins of Our Discontents*, 2020

severity of global warming, or even against the evidence that this global warming has human causes; against any control of the selling of arms to ordinary citizens; against just about everything at the core of what is called the common good. Ironically, noted the participant who made this statement, a few years ago it was said that we need in the United States a third party called the Common Good. The future of the United States is dangerously uncertain.

The profile of the American citizens who voted for Donald Trump in this election of 2020 is important to know. Typically, the Trump supporter is a white man, of the middle-class or lower middle-class. The vast majority of Trump supporters have no college education, and many did not complete their high school education. It should be noted that since about ten years the graduation rates from high schools has been dropping for men in the United States. Minorities of the Trump supporters are evangelists, but they are the most organized and the most vocal.

### ***Denmark, the pandemic and the community spirit***

Since the beginning of the pandemic the concept of “community spirit,” first used by the Prime Minister in a speech of March 2020, has been the driving force of Danish society. It means that each person feels responsible for the welfare of the other and is able to override private interests in favor of the common good. In these last two years Danish people of all political affiliations have been mobilized with their government and their parliament in the struggle against the pandemic. Such unity has not been seen since the Second World War.

What are the origins in Denmark of this community spirit, a concept with the same meaning as the common good? A single person, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, whose life extended through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, had a profound and lasting influence on Danish society. He was a pastor, a preacher, a theologian, a philosopher, a poet, an educator and a politician. In 2020, a book titled *The Common Good, N.F.S. Grundtvig* was published in Denmark.<sup>23</sup> It

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<sup>23</sup>*The Common Good, N.F.S. Grundtvig, as Politician and Contemporary Historian*, Edward Broadbridge (translator and editor), Ove Korsgaard (editor), Aarhus University Press, 2020, 375 pages. This book is number four in the series “N.F.S. Grundtvig: Works in English”. Also of great interest is the book *N. F.S. Grundtvig, An Introduction to his Life and Work*, by A.M. Allchin, Aarhus University Press, 1997, 338 pages.



states that the common good was the key concept in the political philosophy of Grundtvig, who wrote: “In these three words (the common good) we find the only basic law for all people under earth.”

It is through education in the “folk schools,” established by Grundtvig, that this basic law was and still is stamped in the heart of all Danish people. In these schools, children and adults are taught not only the basic disciplines but also how to be responsible citizens. They learn the history of the fatherland, its institutions, and how to exercise their freedom while respecting and contributing to the common good. With the help of such a tradition, one would hope that the community spirit currently shown in Denmark will continue to prevail in these challenging times.

### ***Democracy, migrations and the common good***

Denmark has been pursuing in recent years a very restrictive policy on refugees and migrants. What is the explanation for this fact?

This policy benefits from the support of a majority of the population and has both historical and circumstantial reasons. A proper answer to this important question would therefore require an elaborate answer. Suffice to say at this point that it is regrettably true that Denmark, on those issues of refugees and migrants, is not demonstrating enough global solidarity; It might be noted, however, that Denmark is now more committed to the institutions of the European Union. And the E. U. is at the forefront of the movement towards global solidarity. In turn, this exchange led to a few comments:

- A number of countries, in different parts of the world and generally small, are like Denmark succeeding in maintaining democratic institutions and social cohesion. Keeping in mind that the common good is both an ideal and a minimum requirement for a society to “stand on its feet,” these countries are practicing the common good.
- These same countries are therefore “communities,” in the proper sense of the word. The attitudes and policies of these communities regarding the “others,” refugees or migrants, vary considerably with their history, culture, location, demography and economy.
- Migrations are positive as they increase diversity and help individuals realize their potential. Ideally, one should be able to allow the free

movement of people. One of the problems today is that a majority of migrants are poor people. Driven by extremes of poverty, they cannot survive at home and, out of desperation, look for something better. As such, this kind of forced migration is one of the symptoms of the fundamental imbalance of wealth in the world. A proper sharing of this wealth is part of the common good.

- Migrations occurred throughout history. The drawing up of boundaries is very recent. To think only in terms of crossing boundaries, illegally or legally, is to have a distorted picture of the whole issue of migrations. We need to take a different perspective on migrations and to take distance from our political debates on this matter.
- In his encyclical letter ***Fratelli Tutti*** Pope Francis recalls that many persons migrate to escape from war, from persecution, from natural catastrophes and also for the legitimate desire to find opportunities for themselves and their families. To dream of a better future and to create the conditions for its realization is a noble endeavor. But Pope Francis also recalls that the expectations of migrants are often unrealistic and based on misinformation, and that they are routinely exposed to exploitation and violence from unscrupulous traffickers. Moreover, leaving one's roots is not a light and painless decision and the abandoned community is weakened by the departure of its most vigorous members. Thus, while migrations will remain a "fundamental aspect of the future of the world," "the right not to emigrate, to remain on one's land" has "to be reaffirmed." And receiving countries have the responsibility to uphold the "centrality of the human person" and to find "a just equilibrium between the double moral duty to protect the rights of their own citizens and to guarantee a proper welcome and assistance to migrants."<sup>24</sup>

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The alarming situation of our world makes evident the necessity of a global solidarity. To have a future, humankind must think it and construct it. As

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<sup>24</sup>*Fratelli Tutti*, op. cit. paragraphs 37 to 41.

evidenced by the pandemic, the health of each of us is related to the health of all. And so is the future of each of us and of our descendants. For a global pursuit of the common good, an equal access of all to common goods is a necessity.

Climate change and the pandemic are not the only crises that should mobilize world energy. Poverty, in a broad sense, is also a major issue affecting all countries, including the most affluent. The Sustainable Development Goals at the horizon 2030 (S.D.G.) agreed upon at the United Nations ought to be taken seriously by all.

Using the example of highly probable water shortages, the question of the capability of humankind to consider the needs of other living “things” was raised. In some parts of the world this question should be extended to the capacity of individuals to consider the needs of the ‘Other’, be it a neighbor, a fellow citizen, or another nation. The products of a certain type of liberal education focused on the individual student’s career and professional success have difficulties realizing the extent to which individual lives are bound up to the lives of a larger whole.

We have been assembling pieces of the larger puzzle depicting the state and future of the world. The financing of required actions is a challenge, notably at the global level. We should not forget that what was true yesterday is also true today: the main problem is that the wealth has been used for what is contrary to the common good. That includes the continuously growing military expenditures.

Civil society has been evoked today as a major force (for some, the only force) for the promotion of the common good. Our group is part of it. Ideas and debates matter. They are indispensable. But the old question of the passage from reflection to action, from ideas to policies, remains. It has an even greater acuteness, given the magnitude of the crises the world is confronted with. And there is a widespread conviction among the “people” that only violent forms of protest and dissent eventually lead to results at the political level. In itself, this sentiment marks a failure of democratic systems of government. Given the

additional fact that some policies need to be global, this question of the passage from ideas to policies ought to be on the agenda of all “lobbies” for the common good.

The pandemic has revealed, has highlighted all the inequalities that exist in our societies and in the world as a whole. It has, in many ways, politicized people, making us more aware of the fragilities of our world and more conscious of the importance of coming together for the common good. But it will always be a struggle.

The current pandemic, as with other pandemics such as AIDS, is one of the manifestations of the disharmony of humankind with Nature.

Among the important points that have been mentioned, three ought to be highlighted: interdependence, the principle of subsidiarity, long-term thinking. The latter is crucial in all domains, including the education of the young generations.

The issue of information is of critical importance and has to be addressed. The necessity of having critical media is fundamental. One reason is that the young generations live in an informational universe that raises difficult challenges. Another reason is that global problems demand global solutions that can only be obtained through institutions. As a minimum, existing international agreements and instruments should be protected. Not only their value but their necessity ought to be known and publicized. The results of deliberate misinformation and ignorance are well described in the book from Ann Appelbaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is at the core of the United Nations and of the values that should govern our world. Today, human rights are under siege, under threat. They have to be preserved. They give a concrete content to the common good. Their violation makes a mockery of the treaties in which they are embodied. A growing number of governments openly violate the most basic civil and political rights. Torture is today a common practice. Even in some countries with democratic regimes there is less tolerance for dissent. In countries with authoritarian regimes repression is increasingly vicious. With

few exceptions, governments are less and less accountable. This is a trend that ought to be more exposed and more forcefully combated.

The recognition of differences has become part of a competitive culture. Human rights themselves, which are par excellence the concretization of our common humanity, are subjected to a competitive struggle between different claims of rights. Instead, we should see the respect and promotion of human rights as a celebration of our common humanity. This critical concept of common humanity ought to be the focus of our reflection on the common good.

A pertinent question to ask and to answer ourselves: *How big is your “we?”*

There is no coherent and lasting “we” without strong “I.” A real community is made of free and responsible individuals. A real international community ought to be made of free and responsible nations.

All of us, participants in this meeting, are aware of the seriousness of the various threats confronting humankind. We know, in particular, that globally, the measures taken to limit the magnitude of the pending ecological catastrophes are grossly insufficient. Are we sufficiently integrating this knowledge into our reflections, our debates?

At the ceremony for the inauguration of Joseph Biden as President of the United States, a young lady, Amanda Gorman, delivered a moving and inspiring poem. Here is an extract:

*We are striving to forge a Union with purpose*

*To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man.*

*And so we lift our gazes not to what stands*

*Between us*

*But to what stands before us.*

*We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,*

*We must first put our differences aside.*

*We lay down our arms*

*So we can reach out our arms  
To one another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.*

In the current circumstances, optimism is a decision. And it is the most rational, i decision. Optimism puts in to practice the virtues of hope (espérance) and charity (love, *agape*). A lucid, informed optimism shapes the actions corresponding to each person's station in life and society. This means seizing the opportunities that every crisis opens and concentrating on the positive rather than on the negative facets of the changes in cultures and institutions. Positive means that the common good is more present in the intellectual and political discourse than a few decades ago. Positive is the fact that the United Nations is still operating in spite of its deficiencies and that its principles, norms and objectives though transgressed are still respected in some parts of the world and still offer ethical and political guidance. And the same could be said of other institutions such as the European Union. Perhaps above all, the mobilization of people of good will in the different layers of societies is unprecedented. There is no choice but to think and act as if a universal common good is reachable.

## VII. ANNEX I

### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

**Christian Baalslev-Olesen**

**Peter Baas**

**Amelie Baudot**

**Barbara Baudot**

**Jacques Baudot**

**Torben Brylle**

**Guillaume Bugnet**

**Charles Courtney**

**Arthur Dahl**

**Liz Demsky**

**Nitin Desai**

**Edward Dommen**

**Sarah Gingerella**

**Steve Gorman**

**Noriko Hashimoto**

**Marie-Aimee Latournerie**

**Jorgen Lisner**

**Dennis MacDonald**

**Dominique Michal**

**Margo Picken**

**Konrad Raiser**

**Hideo Shingu**

**Harlan Wilson**

***Moderator:* Barbara Baudot**

***Secretary:* Sarah Gingerella**

***Rapporteur:* Jacques Baudot**

## VIII. ANNEX II

### EXTRACTS OF THE REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SEMINAR ON ETHICAL AND SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL PROGRESS

(Bled, Slovenia, 28-30 October 1994)

Part I. Background and intentions

Part II. Working assumptions

Part III. The spirit of the time and the objectives of the Social Summit

Part IV. Human dignity as the central value for political action

Part V. Self-interest and the common good

23. It would seem that the cult of money, performance and instant gratification mentioned above as characteristics of the spirit of the times that work against social progress and social harmony also work against the quest for the common good, unless the latter is considered the automatic and morally neutral result of the forces at work at this moment of human history. But the common good cannot be morally neutral. It is neither the result of commercial transactions, nor of political strategies and balances, cultural and moral trends of the moment, nor, precisely, of the spirit of the times. It should be the fruit of deliberate efforts in all areas of human activities, whether economics, politics, culture, science, ethics and spirituality. The common good is both a state, which is always being renewed and transformed, and an aspiration. It is a practical necessity, in an era when humanity is "one" in its means of exchange and communications and is also "one" because it has the capacity to destroy itself. It is a moral obligation, if one realizes that turning inward towards one's community, nation or region, has no ethical justification or practical value. Today, the common good should be experienced and sought at the level of the most individual relationships and at the level of the future of all humanity.

24. In an era marked by interdependence and also by a certain fragmentation of human communities, what are the elements of the common good? Poverty reduction? A job for all who desire one? The elimination of all forms of discrimination, prejudices and the various forms of rejection of the other that mar humanity? Undoubtedly, and also peace, security and the reduction of the many threats that loom over the world at the end of the twentieth



century. And finally, more joy and harmony, and an abundance of knowledge and spirit.

25. Individual interest, or self-interest is apparently easier to define, and also apparently easier to satisfy. If we look at the superficial common meaning, it means that an individual hopes to be and to obtain and all that he wishes to have or invest for instant or deferred gratification. In fact, in no culture is self-interest considered totally selfish and limitless. There are objective curbs, such as the interests of close family, the limits imposed by ability, time and energy, and the need to allow for the fact that other individuals and groups are also free to pursue their own interests. There are also cultural and ethical curbs. Expressions such as “enlightened self-interest” suggest that calculation, reason or morality leads individuals – or groups and nations – to conceive and experience their interests with more complexity than instinct might dictate. If this is indeed true, entering an indictment against a dominant culture that seemed overly concerned with pursuing individual interests to the point of forgetting the very concept of the common good would be a useful criticism, but somewhat inadequate. It would be more productive to show that the only way to reconcile personal interest and the common good is to give the former a content and orientation that would transform it into a contribution to the latter. It is selfishness, egotism and egocentrism rather than individualism that are destructive. It is not the quest for more power or greater profits that is bad for the individual and society, but the motives for that quest, if they are dominated by vanity, the hunger for power or the desire to profit at the expenses of others. It is not the desire to develop, improve and expand one’s being, talents and abilities that can be seen as anti-social. On the contrary, and in contrast to narcissism, true individual progress is indivisibly connected to relationships with the other – the family, the community, and all humanity – and with nature, the universe and the spiritual or divine whole. Individualism is an empty vessel that can be filled with good or evil. While the general interest can be simply the sum of selfish or short-term interests, the common good, by definition, has a normative content, and can only be the sum, plus “value-added,” of “enlightened self-interest” guided by common virtues, values and spirituality. Today, these spiritual virtues, values and demands should be drawn from all the religions and philosophies that have enriched humanity. This is not a

**middle-of-the road or reductionist approach, or a vague syncretism, but the quest for a common humanity.**

**26. A very important example for our times of the relationship between individual interests and the common good can be found in the world of economics and business. Major efforts are being made to promote social responsibility among companies and to introduce ethical dimensions in their strategies and policies. Aside from the question of honesty in financial dealings and product quality, a “company ethic” has various aspects and “targets.” It may involve an ethic relating to the physical environment (pollution issues, working conditions, employee safety, for example), the buyers of its products (issues involving the physical or mental health of consumers), or even elements of the national or international community, for example the choice of an investment site or the decision to create or eliminate jobs in one region or another. These decisions and choices at various levels are not necessarily complementary and not automatically compatible. The dictates of ethics should be illuminated by a general philosophy of responsibility and the common good. Experience also supports moral principles in suggesting that the business ethic, in order to be lasting, must be implemented fully and consistently. Moreover, there is no simple and consistently positive relationship between the quality of the ethic and capacity for innovation; the latter disturbs structures, habits and ways of thinking. Virtue and change must constantly be reconciled and change involve risk, including for the “established” ethic. The same is true for societies as a whole. Virtue is often associated in people’s minds with stability and conservatism. However, the spiritual leaders of all religions and philosophies have conceived and experienced their quest for perfection as an exhilarating and dangerous adventure. In the end, observations on the role of ethics in the life of companies show that there is no contradiction – indeed there is often a positive relationship – between success in the conventional sense of profits and return on investment and success in terms of ethical requirements. The entrepreneur who makes morally good decisions may do so based on principles and values which he has internalized and which inform his actions. He may be guided by the “enlightened self-interest” of his company. Again, the point is that there is not necessarily a contradiction between individual interests defined intelligently and morally and the**

common good. Honesty may be practiced out of virtue or because it is the best policy. It is possible to argue that there is a “social Darwinism;” that the societies which observe such ethical principles as tolerance and solidarity are best able to survive.

27. All the major religions and philosophies have prescribed some form of balance between individual and collective interests. For example, the five elements constituting fundamental rights in Islam – right to life, right to property, right to faith, right to honour and right to the authority of reason – must be carried out both individually and collectively. Thus the tax by which the rich must help the poor is a religious duty towards the community before it is an individual act. Since it is channeled through the collective the recipient cannot feel humiliated.

28. In learning to be fully human, the individual finds both his personal identity and his place in the human community. This is a process, a difficult apprenticeship involving the heart and the mind. The identity of the person, the self, is crucial is there that selfishness must be defeated in order to make way for dignity and self-esteem. The family, which must also conquer its selfishness and power relationships, provides the environment for the human being to grow in goodness and love. The community is also essential for the full realization of the person because it teaches respect for the other. Individuals become fully human when they embody the spirit that defines humanity.

29. The key to the future lies in the search for human dignity and the common good. A new vision is necessary, which should focus once again on social action. The triumph of the self opens the way to dictatorship. There is also to draw up a new pedagogic conception of political action which would enable politicians to lead their citizens towards greater fulfillment. Political action requires the highest intellectual and moral integrity. This implies new standards for the evaluation of political action based on the verdict of people and history. All that degrades humankind is hateful.

30. This question of the relationship between the individual and the community and between the interests of the individual – or of the group; class or nation – and the common good is fundamental for societies to function and for the future of humankind. Once again, some thoughts in the form of precepts can no doubt be developed further.

**(i) Individual interest, if selfishly and blindly pursued, is destructive for society and for the individual himself; all wealth implies social responsibility; the accumulation of wealth at the expense of others destroy the universal harmony;**

**(ii) Only individual improvement, guided by culture and spirituality, can make social progress possible;**

**(iii) The common good is not a lowest common denominator; on the contrary, mediocrity threatens contemporary societies; and the search for the common good must be guided by exceptional courage, virtue, intelligence and ability;**

**(iv) When the search for human dignity directs thoughts and action, there is a continuity, indeed an identity, between the individual interest and the common good.**

**Next in this report is Part VI. Enriching the discourse in the search for solutions to the three central themes of the Social Summit, followed by contributions by participants and officials of the host country.**