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ARISTOTELIAN TOWNISM AND SUSTAINABLE INFORMATION SOCIETY (SIS)

Ladies and gentlemen

I have both pleasure and honour to bring the greetings of Kouvola town to the first international kollokvium of European Institute of Sustainable Information Society here in Kouvola. At the same time I want to congratulate the members of this new non-governmental organisation.

I started my sis-career about 20 years ago in Kontiolahti and have been more or less integrated in idea all the time after that. Here in Kouvola we have had two international conferences, 1996 a conference concerning sustainable transport in Europe and 2001 a conference concerning sustainable information society, theory and every day life. I could imagine, that also this seminar is some kind of child of this conference.

But I think, I should start by explaining what the 2400-year-old philosophy of Aristotle has to do with a modern sustainable information society.

In his 1982 book "Megatrends" John Naisbitt states that "The great lesson we must learn from the principle of high tech/ high touch is a modern version of the ancient Greek ideal - balance." "We must learn to balance the material wonders of technology with the spiritual demands of our human nature."

Throughout history, human beings both as individuals and as a community have strived – sometimes through violent upheaval – for balance and a harmonious existence. There are many reasons why the ideas of the ancient philosophers have significance even for today's ethical and sociophilosophical issues. The main reason may be that these patterns of thought still apply directly to today's situation. The philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome have had an essential impact on the formation of the European view of humanity and social ideology. The thoughts of the ancient philosophers are still viable and on-target, especially on the subject of the role of social interaction in leading a successful life and on the organisation of communal bonds in a successful society. In fact, the whole model of a good life, which probes the whole foundation of humanity, has its basis in this philosophy, especially in the framework of Aristotelian philosophy.

Aristotle had a positive concept of freedom: an individual is free if he can govern his own life. His system of Nicomachean ethics explains what qualities a self-governing individual should possess.

Meanwhile, his political theory suggests possible properties that social structures and institutions should possess to allow for the development of self-governing individuals who have freedom of choice. Aristotle feels that a good form of state is not non-denominational, but is committed to upholding the prerequisites of a good life. When wielding state power, one should remember that this power is targeted at free citizens. The state should make sure that people have the opportunity to lead a good life, but the people are themselves responsible for using this opportunity to their advantage. One of the foundations of a good life is that a person is able to take responsibility for his own life. Aristotle's sociopolitical ideology includes encouraging each citizen to use his own initiative and preventing the birth of a culture of dependence. It also includes the formation of a healthy living environment, education designed to further the fulfillment of the potential and talents of the citizens, and the provision of the prerequisites for spiritual and physical culture as well as other forms of communal life. This ideology is opposed to the large-scale patronage of citizens, and recommends extensive freedom for both individuals and local communities.

According to Aristotelian philosophy, the political community is an essential prerequisite of a good life as well as a means to construct other prerequisites for this life. But if this was the only responsibility of a political community, it would just be a tool, leaving the good life itself to be defined independent of political structures. But Aristotelian political philosophy does not intend for this to happen. The actions within a political community are factors of a good life, but also have an individual worth and are considered worth striving for in themselves. An essential part of a good life is the possibility to participate in deciding on the just and fair organisation of common affairs with other citizens on an equal standing. The communal aspect of humanity comes alive within the political community. That is why the political community is not just a tool, but a worthy objective in itself. Belonging to and identifying with a political community thus defines a human being's identity. But what makes Aristotelian philosophy important as opposed to, say, Plato, is that it states that people participate in communal activity as separate individuals, not just as part of a whole. The political striving for the common good thus also brings about individual good for each person.

DEMOCRACY

In ancient Greece, the leading form of government was the city-state, a unit roughly the size of a modern European small town. It should be noted that the Europe of today is very urbanised, with almost 80 % of all EU citizens living in cities, with about 40 % living in small cities of 50 000 citizens or less. While one of the biggest problems facing the EU and many individual nation states is people's distrust of institutions, regional and local governments are gaining a bigger role in the reorganisation of democracy. People are more trusting of lower levels of government, though voting behaviour – in Finland at least – has taken a disturbing turn also in local elections. It is odd that while for the first time in human history the majority of people (63 %) live under parliamentary

democracies, even in Europe, the cradle of Western democracy, people are also voluntarily giving up the century-old basic principle of democracy: the principle of majority. If, for instance, the next Finnish municipal elections continue the trend seen in the last two elections, it won't be long until we will have a minority, usually the more affluent citizens, selecting their own representatives as in America. I feel this will have a dramatic effect on the social, economic and ecological realisation of sustainable development both here and around the world.

GLOBALISATION AND LOCALISATION

In these first years of a new millennium, one of the most eagerly-debated and most revolutionary factors, in addition to the information society development, is globalisation. Throughout the world it has divided and continues to divide people into staunch supporters and opponents. However, it is important to remember that we must look for the true causes that underlie events, and not attempt to present everything as a consequence of the on-going global integration. Globalisation is always only a contributing factor in the development of societies, and has both positive and negative effects.

One of the undisputed effects of globalisation is that it promotes polarisation: together with other factors such as information technology, it divides both people, regions and countries into winners and losers. It absorbs into itself the most dynamic domains in a society and neglects others. The lower the stage of development of an economy is, the greater is the inequalising and polarising effect of globalisation. The more diversified, but at the same time, the more equitable the regional development of a society is, the better its chances are in the global competition. In this sense we are justified in saying that social sustainability and the equitable distribution of prosperity are also a condition for ecologically sustainable development. Economic objectives must be harmonised with ecological and social factors. But this can only be achieved by re-instituting, as far as possible, the local character of economic activity. This opinion has been voiced, among others, by David Korten, well-known for his criticism of globalisation. He is seconded by Elinor Ostrom, whose book "Governing the Commons" describes the interaction of people and the environment by means of thorough case studies from different parts of the world. Her advice for institutions that want to promote the sustainable management of natural resources is to safeguard the responsibility of the local community in managing local natural resources.

INFORMATION SOCIETY AND EQUITY

What I want to do, is to emphasise the significance of the local actors as guarantors of sustainable development in society, economy, culture and ecology, and as minimisers of the negative effects of globalisation. The local level also has an important role in the development towards the information society and especially in minimising its polarising effects. It is of primary importance for the positive development of an information society that the educational system guarantees all citizens get the

basic knowledge required by an information society, so as to make sure that in the future everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in social activity and to use services. According to international studies, about 80 % of IT users are men, 20 % women. It is therefore essential to support girls and women as users of IT, since this also has an effect on the types of applications developed and the actual substance of the information society. According to a study made by the World Bank, human resources make up 60 % of the prosperity of nations. For this reason, education is an essential guarantor of all social and human rights, and also a crucial factor on our road towards sustainable development.

SUSTAINABLE INFORMATION SOCIETY

It is a fairly widespread assumption that moving into the information society will automatically solve environmental problems and promote sustainable development. Nevertheless it must be emphasised that the advent of the information society and the development of IT in themselves are no guarantee of the attainment of a sustainable society; rather, the crucial step along the road to sustainable development is taken by the information society when we realise that it does not automatically support environmentally friendly solutions, but that it only has the potential to do so. IT in itself contains the possibilities for both positive and negative effects and, as is generally the case with technology, in this case the ultimate effects depend strongly on the economic and social framework that steers the development of technology.

According to Bertrand Russell, the purpose of technological sciences is not so much to understand the world as to change it. For long, the technological sciences have held a dominant position in comparison to the humanities. Professor Aulis J. Aarnio wrote in 1982 that “the technical and the humanist approaches appear in a frightening manner to diverge from each other, and technological sciences lack a self-understanding which would help to understand the consequences of technological development in terms of the big picture”. If this is true, technological sciences cannot be allowed a dominant position in the search for what is best for humanity. In Aarnio`s opinion, the social significance of technological development will inevitably continue to grow. It is not immaterial who makes the decisions that steer development, and the choice of values that determine the direction of development is not an insignificant one. More than anywhere, in the information society it is essential to discuss the concepts of democracy and power, the problem of justice, the legitimacy of social and juridical order, as well as the issue of good and evil.

The realisation of sustainable development requires, above all, the identification of the values and beliefs that form the basis of different opinions. Value-related choices can have an influence on the goals that IT and the development of the information society in general will strive after. Both technological and social choices and opportunities are directly dependent on their underlying

values, which in their turn are based on our conception of humans as technology users and of the relationship between humans and the environment.

ARISTOTELIAN TOWNISM AND SIS

Manuel Castells, one of the world's foremost researchers in globalisation and the information society, thinks that Finland has what it takes to become a model country in the information age and the globalised network economy. According to Castells, Finland possesses the following five keys to success:

- a strong regional identity
- advanced technology
- the possibilities for developing network innovations
- a democratic civil society
- a system of welfare services that has been tried in difficult conditions

It should be noted that Castells' list of the keys to success emphasizes equality, the welfare system and a cultural identity. For Castells, Finland is not just a Nokia engineers' and mobile phone merchants' dream, but a humane and just society based on the value of joint responsibility. Castells' assessment could be said to include some as-yet unattained goals, but as I see it, our nation's government has as one of its objectives the formation of an information society with sustainable development and with the underlying values of humanity and equality.

So, what does Aristotelian townism mean in the Europe of today? As I said before, most Europeans live in small cities of 50 000 citizens or less. Though these are not akin to the city-states of old, they can be said to be of human proportions and easy to perceive as a whole. They may provide people with a comfortable and safe environment to live, work and act within, an environment where the challenges of ecological sustainability have been met. I emphasize the word "may", for just as the information society does not automatically lead to sustainable development, so also does the size of a community not automatically lead to it. Of late, safety has held an especially important place in the minds of people.

Through their own urban planning, cities can themselves greatly influence the realisation of an urban structure that coincides with the concept of sustainable development. The compactification of the social structure is generally considered an important objective, as making the more peripheral areas of cities more compact in particular will prevent the spread of cities to the as-yet unbuilt areas surrounding them. A compact urban structure that expands through complementary new building, renovations and modifications reduces traffic and energy needs and improves the competitive position of light and public transport. There will also be a related reduction in air pollution and carbon dioxide emissions, and the utilisation of the already existing infrastructure will

save natural resources and cut economic costs. In general, the carefully-planned positioning of residences, jobs and services can help make a city more functional by reducing the need for excess mobility and by making sure services are available in everyone's immediate vicinity.

In recent years, the comfort and functionality of city centres has been a subject of much discussion in many Finnish cities, including Kouvola. Comfortable pedestrian districts in city centres have brought new business, cafés and other services to city centres, as well as more people, at least in Kouvola. The centre has become a kind of living room for the people who live in the city and the surrounding rural areas. Danish architect Jan Geel has noted that the more public spaces and places, such as pedestrian districts, squares and parks, a city has for people to meet, converse and enjoy themselves in free-of-charge, the more democratic the city is. Local identity is still important for people.

On the other hand, the city can also provide citizens an opportunity and a forum to meet, communicate, converse and participate through the net as part of a modern information society. This type of so-called direct participation cannot replace the traditional representative democracy, but it can provide an additional element to the interaction between citizens, elected officials and the authorities. One of the challenges of an information society can be thought to be how to get messages to travel from on high down to the grass roots, and especially vice versa. I personally believe that if citizens are given the opportunity to have an impact, a say and a stand on the decisions concerning them and their environment, they will be more encouraged to exercise their traditional democratic rights through elections. Olavi Borg, one of the leading Finnish political scientists, has stated that "the introduction of information technology into democratic processes may be just the modern tool to get the younger generations involved in the decision-making process". This is a challenge the City of Kouvola is taking on with its youth-centered digital democracy project, a part of SIS-Kouvola. (SIS transparencies)

It should be noted that this is the second Kouvola City Council term when all council members have been provided with computers to help them stay in closer contact with one another, the citizens and other branches of the local government.

To conclude I'd like to say that if we wish to get closer to the ancient Greek ideal of balance Naisbitt mentioned we should strive to strengthen the grass roots-on-up activity and self-governance of individuals as well as the role of local government as a minimiser of the negative effects of globalisation. We should also place more importance on ecological considerations and strive for long-term economic gains, rather than quick economic fixes. Our focus when developing the information society should be more on human and behavioural sciences than on the currently dominant technological sciences. And we must remember that the development of the information

society will not automatically lead to sustainable development, but will only provide the potential for it. It all comes down to human choice.