

“Adapting Policies and Institutions to meet the Systemic Challenges of the Modern World”

Martin Lees, Gorbachev High Level Task Force on Climate Change; Vice Chairman, Conference on Affordable World Security, Washington; Senior Adviser, Program on “A New Path for World Development,” Club of Rome; Adviser to the African Union on the Pan African University; United Kingdom

Martin Lees will examine the realities of the issues which threaten the future and suggest why we are failing to contain them. He will sketch the relevance of systems thinking as a basis for understanding and action and outline four key facets of governance. He will suggest how we could be more successful in managing the connected issues of the modern world and propose conclusions which may be of interest in the Seminar discussions.

1. The present business as usual path is not only generating major risks of breakdown in the areas of climate and environment but also in regard to the world economic and financial systems, to social cohesion and to peace. We have, however, enormous capabilities and resources and solutions are available. But we are clearly failing to understand, to agree and to act to assure a decent and secure future.
2. We must be clear about the characteristics of the challenges we face in the 21st Century and then identify why we are failing and the obstacles to change.
3. In part, we fail because we insist on treating essentially connected issues as if they were distinct, in line with the Western scientific tradition of reductionism. Systems thinking, which recognises the vital aspects of connectedness, the effects of scale and time, systems behaviour and non-linearity can contribute vital insights into the nature of the systemic issues which will determine the future.
4. We do not need to remain committed to a failing model of consumer-driven growth. We could lay the foundations of a better resource-efficient, inclusive future by: developing an integrated approach across disciplines, sectors and “silos”, by reducing the dominance of economics in policy, by questioning our belief in the stimulus of consumer demand as the solution to our problems, and in restoring the legitimacy and effectiveness of government as the custodian of the common interest.
5. New thinking on governance for sustainability should recognise four key facets: the intellectual facet of ideas, models and analysis; values and beliefs which are the underlying drivers of attitudes, behaviour and change; the framework of institutions which not only implement policies but also are key to their formulation; and, crucially, the issues of power, money and interest which are, in key areas today, dominating perceptions and the choice of solutions.
6. Five broad conclusions follow: the need to complement incremental improvements with profound transformational change; the need to reform the institutions of national and international governance for flexibility and resilience; the central importance of the science-policy interface; the need for educational innovation in curricula and methodology; and finally, the evident need to restore the capacities in governments and the international system to anticipate and plan for future change.