

UPF and WFWP Italy: Crisis and Opportunities for Fair and Sustainable Economy

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Rome, Italy -- The fourth Italian "Peace Talks" webinar focused on "Interdependence and Shared Prosperity: Crisis and Opportunities for a Fair and Sustainable Economy." UPF-Italy and the UPF project International Association for Peace and Economic Development (IAED) held the online conference together with the Italian chapter of Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an affiliated organization.

The July 2, 2020, webinar had approximately 200 participants, in addition to an estimated 500 watching the live stream on UPF-Italy's Facebook page and on the Eco dei Palazzi channel that broadcasts within the two chambers of Parliament.

The speakers were:

Dr. Marco Ricceri, secretary general of the European Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies

Dr. Elisabetta Palmisano, the head of the Press Office and Institutional Reports for the Tecnopolo science park

Dr. Emanuela Reale, the director of the Research Institute on Sustainable Economic Growth

Professor Stefano Bartolini, a professor of political economy and social economics at the University of Siena

The meeting was presented by WFWP-Italy Vice President Gabriella Mieli; greetings and the introduction to the theme were given by WFWP-Italy President Elisabetta Nistri. UPF-Italy President Carlo Zonato moderated the meeting. UPF-Italy Secretary General Franco Ravaglioli introduced the question-and-answer session, while the technical and directing aspect was conducted by Giorgio Gasperoni, director in charge of Voci di Pace, the quarterly magazine of UPF and WFWP.

Some highlights of the speeches:

Dr. Marco Ricceri: In September 2019, the United Nations published its quadrennial report on sustainable development, issuing a precise warning for decision-makers in both the public and private spheres: "If we do not accelerate this process of sustainable development, we risk irreversible damage to our global system."

The coronavirus crisis has highlighted the fragility of the current development model, Dr. Ricceri said. It is widely believed that in the coming months we may face considerable difficulties, given the highly depressed situation. A second concept is the term "sustainable," which means a growth model that avoids breaking points with respect to possible social, environmental or economic imbalances.

We therefore need a balanced vision of progress, he said. The problem is that although these warnings or possible imbalances are confirmed by all the member states, in reality we find continuous conflicts, contrasts and wars. It is therefore necessary, he said, to shift the focus and strategies to what unites rather than what divides.

A further element is contained in another UN document, which asks how the model of globalization will develop. Is it a process that will continue or regress? On the one hand, there are tensions and conflicts animated by sovereignty, and on the other, a series of collaborative and cooperative modes. From this point of view, associations and governments should decisively promote a cooperation perspective involving public opinion, Dr. Ricceri said. The coronavirus has led to closures and blockages, but people have sought new forms of connection, cooperation, work and exchange.

In any case, the concept of sustainability requires an "adequate and balanced vision" with respect to the three fundamental factors of development -- economic, social and environmental -- in a logic of integrated vision and not in separate compartments. It is necessary to encourage companies toward an integrated budgetary logic that takes these three factors into account, he said. In addition, it is necessary to raise awareness of the intervention of governments for a programming of incentives and support, but directed more toward a qualitative development than a quantitative development.

Dr. Elisabetta Palmisano said that within the Tecnopolo she is in contact with about 140 companies, including those in the agri-food area. From chamber of commerce data, it is clear that unfortunately 35,000 companies will close as a result of the coronavirus. This depends on two basic aspects: If, after two months of closure, a company is forced to close, it means that it does not have a serious and prudent budget policy, and also that it relies too much on bank loans rather than its own means.

Another phenomenon, Dr. Palmisano said, was "smart working," which, despite the resumption of activities, is continuing thanks to government regulations. However, this has forced the closure of many activities such as bars, diners, etc., whose activity revolved around these industrial or technological poles. Unfortunately, certain declared government commitments are still not operational (redundancy fund). There is a need to provide companies with advisory support to train and prepare them more adequately for crisis situations. In any case, there is a strong need for financial support so that they can move forward, because the situation is very critical.

Dr. Emanuela Reale: The pandemic not only is endangering health but also has economic and psychological consequences. As far as the economic aspects are concerned, we are witnessing a growth that has been stuck between a strong reduction in GDP and heavy job losses, as well as a financial liquidity emergency.

There is less talk of the social effects resulting from the closure of schools, working at home, etc., as well as psychological effects such as sleep disorders, the inability to go out and proactively resume commitments, or phenomena of anxiety and depression, up to more extreme situations such as the intensification of domestic violence induced by confinement. These phenomena probably will produce their effects more in the medium to long term.

In this worrying scenario, however, examples of "new awareness" are emerging. The first is the awareness of aiming at a sustainable development model in a more decisive way. Another is that acquiring more skills in the use of digital technology requires a technological leap forward as a country and a more adequate degree of training. The third awareness is of the most urgent need to have data quickly or even immediately in order to manage unexpected phenomena; at the same time, there is a need for transparency and reliability of the data itself, linked to the quality of information in the broad sense.

A final note about smart-working, she said, is that, if started by necessity in this phase, it shows opportunities for future use with various advantages, if well organized. Ultimately we should not waste this "momentum" of greater awareness to reset a new system of "welfare" and sustainable development.

Professor Stefano Bartolini congratulated the organizers on the choice of a fully appropriate theme. COVID-19 has triggered changes that are epochal in scope, he said. In recent decades we have experienced a utopia (neo-liberalism), according to which development was guaranteed by the strengthening of the private economy, which also becomes a guarantor of good social functioning. In this dimension, the public sector is of limited importance.

COVID-19, however, showed us that collective action to safeguard the public and the common good is absolutely vital. Millions of people, however, think that COVID-19 does not exist and that it is not dangerous. This important mass of people are perhaps underestimating themselves, but unfortunately their approach risks being "anti-system" and losing the opportunity for a concrete change of system. In order to avoid this risk, we must present real, concrete proposals for system change. Therefore, concrete, reasonable and feasible proposals for change are urgently needed.