

40th Jubilee Year



EUROPEAN CENTER FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT (ECPD)
UNIVERSITY FOR PEACE ESTABLISHED BY THE UNITED NATIONS

XVI ECPD International Conference

THE FUTURE IS TO BE INVENTED

Belgrade, 28 October 2023 - 10:00 AM

Ceremonial Hall of the Rectorate of the University of Belgrade

CONCEPT NOTE

CHAIR:

H.E. Prof. Dr. Federico Mayor Zaragoza, President of the ECPD Council

The European Center for Peace and Development (ECPD), affiliated with the University for Peace established by the United Nations, has organized annual international conferences for many years to strengthen mutual understanding and human security, especially in the troubled Balkans region. After a pause due to the pandemic, facing an accelerating climate crisis, and now with conflict in Europe, we need peace more than ever in what is environmentally and economically a single global system where only global solidarity can save the world from drawn-out suffering. Leaders who deny this new reality are unable to respond effectively to the challenges their citizens are facing. The efforts of ECPD for peace and reconciliation are especially important today.

There are so many signs that the world as we have known it is disintegrating that to mention them all would be deeply depressing. The UN Secretary-General, in his 6 February 2023 [briefing to the General Assembly](#) on priorities for 2023, warns about “a confluence of challenges unlike any other in our lifetimes. Wars grind on. The climate crisis burns on. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty rage on. The gulf between the haves and have-nots is cleaving societies, countries and our wider world. Epic geopolitical divisions are undermining global solidarity and trust. This path is a dead end.” War is the antithesis of development, except for the arms industry. The pandemic exposed the weakness of global solidarity. The climate crisis is accelerating, our war on nature destroys biodiversity, and widespread waste and pollution have contaminated the whole planet and even ourselves. A fragile and unjust economy, social fragmentation, and many other symptoms show that our society is seriously ill and we have yet to find the remedy. In our consumer society, it is the affluent who are the cause of most of our environmental problems. The number of people has tripled in one lifetime, but despite the great increase in wealth, half the population struggles to make ends meet. We have overshoot the planet’s carrying capacity and are rapidly degrading the natural environment and resources upon which our future and that of our children depend. These challenges are far beyond what the United Nations was designed for, and despite many accomplishments, it is not up to present needs and must be transformed for the 21st Century. What is clear is that there is no going back, and the past is no guide to the future. That future is yet to be invented and we have the responsibility to find the best way forward.

A good analogy is a caterpillar, that must weave a cocoon around itself and disintegrate in order to transform into a beautiful butterfly. We have reached the stage in our social evolution where our identities defining ourselves as distinct races, cultures and nations geographically separated across our planet are no longer suited to a world that science and technology have united into a single planetary community. We

40th Jubilee Year



EUROPEAN CENTER FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT (ECPD) UNIVERSITY FOR PEACE ESTABLISHED BY THE UNITED NATIONS

must give up the attributes of an animal crawling on the ground or gnawing on a plant in order to fly in the wide open spaces and fulfil our destiny.

This conference is an opportunity to imagine the future we should like to live in, and what we need to do now in order to get there. We must question all our assumptions about what is normal or right, as these trap us in the old patterns of behaviour that are at the root of most of our problems. Are we really inherently aggressive and competitive in the struggle to win out over others? Is life a zero-sum game where winning means that someone else must be the loser? Should our identity be a cause of separation, or a contribution to our unity in diversity? What about our gender stereotypes? Racism, nationalism and religious bigotry have deep roots in our subconscious. We inherit so much without questioning that it requires a significant effort to bring ourselves to account each day.

Many thinkers down through the centuries have imagined future utopias, but that is not enough. We need to consider the physical characteristics of the world we want to build and live in, and how our human systems will relate to and integrate with the natural systems of the biosphere. Beyond that, we need to reflect on the qualities of our communities, the systems of organization and governance required from the local to the global levels, how the economy would function, what would be everyone's rights and responsibilities, and most fundamentally what would be the underlying principles and values to guide this ever-evolving system. Our time in this conference is short, so we should not dwell on the problems we are facing except where they teach a lesson or inspire a solution. What wisdom can the older generations usefully share with those coming after, and what new wisdom of a very different world can the youth of today bring to our reflections? The ECPD Youth Forum is meeting immediately after this conference. What messages do we want to transmit to them, as it is their future that we need to be inventing? We cannot deny the real difficulties we face. The immediate future looks grim, with no immediate end of crises and catastrophes in sight as the negative side of human nature continues to dominate the economic, political and social frameworks of present world society. But the new forces of integration can pick up momentum even as the processes of disintegration continue. The more we build now, the sooner will the transition come and the less painful it will be. We should focus on hope, a rare commodity in today's world, being positive, full of creative imagination, drawing on the fantastic potential hiding within all of us, and how this can emerge. Today will only be a start, but tomorrow is already the future. The more we build forward, the more that future opens up before us.

Dimensions of the future

Some dimensions of the future that we need to build can inspire us in our consultation now and our efforts to follow.

The global system needs to be organized at **multiple levels**, from communities or neighbourhoods, to cities, countries, regions and the global level, with principles of subsidiarity to place responsibility as close as possible to those immediately affected. Then there are the dimensions of **social organization**, including governance, participation, inclusion, social security, and education, with the need for a new social contract. The **economy** needs to be completely rethought with a social purpose, including true wealth creation and equitable distribution, meaningful employment for all, sustainable resource use, optimal sizes, and moderation. Our relationship to **nature**, to the biosphere that sustains us, to other living creatures, needs to be brought back to the centre of our planning, for without a healthy planet our future is compromised. Then we need to consider the new opportunities opened up by modern **technologies**, for a world that can communicate, share knowledge and organize in totally new ways and at a global scale. How do we master these technologies to ensure that they contribute to human wellbeing? At the most fundamental level, we

40th Jubilee Year



EUROPEAN CENTER FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT (ECPD) UNIVERSITY FOR PEACE ESTABLISHED BY THE UNITED NATIONS

need to agree on those essential **values** that express our higher human purpose and that enable successful social organisation. These determine our human rights and responsibilities and are essential to human dignity and to achieving unity in diversity. They may have deep roots in faith and belief, and draw both from science and religion. How do we rein in our lower animal side and cultivate our higher human virtues? No transformation at higher levels of organization can be effective if we do not also transform the individuals within the system. How do we accompany everyone on the path towards the future we want to see?

We can also consider and share examples of the positive features of transformation, and explore case studies already trying to exemplify possible futures. What is being learned from alternative life styles, model communities, new forms of business organization, and new kinds of governance?

Within this larger framework of reflection, what does all this mean for the Balkans? What transformation is needed within the region to respond to and integrate with these broader processes? What are the special characteristics of the region, the strengths to build on, and lessons already learned, that can contribute to the larger discourse on the future? For an educational institution such as ECPD, how can this define new directions in what we offer our students as we prepare them for future leadership?

Clearly this is an agenda for a generation, not a one-day conference, but we can get a start on inventing the future. If each of us leaves with some new inspiration, some immediate goal, some new partnership, ready to share whatever we learn here with ever-larger circles, that better future can begin now. Tomorrow is the ECPD Youth Forum. We can now pass the torch to them to carry on where we have left off, for this is their future more than ours.

March 2023

