

### European Union Commissioner H. E Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius visited Development Alternatives



Team Development Alternatives with distinguished guests at DAHQ

**O**n 26 July 2023 Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for Environment, Ocean and Fisheries, visited Development Alternatives' Headquarters for a discussion with like-minded leaders of the contemporary time from diverse organisations. The agenda was to discuss the role of civil society and academia in context to human settlement and ongoing climate crisis, sustainable construction and affordable housing in urbane spaces in particular.

Other distinguished personalities who attended this high profile discussion were Dr Ashok Khosla, Chairman, Development Alternatives; Dr Arun Kumar President Emeritus & Mentor-in-Chief, Development Alternatives Group; Mr Shombi Sharp, Resident Coordinator, United Nations; Dr Michael Bucki, Counsellor, Head of Section Delegation of European Union to India; Mr Sappo Nurmi, Deputy Head, European Union Delegation to India; Mr Shrashtant Patara, CEO, Development Alternatives; Ms Zeenat Niazi, Chief Knowledge Officer and Senior Vice President, Development Alternatives; Ms Vishaish Uppal, Director, Governance, Law and Policy, WWF-India; Dr KS Casimir SJ, Director, XLRI; Mr Sam Placid, Head Partnership and Management Development Programme, XLRI; MA Rabindranath, Founder, Leap Curve; Ms Bharati Chaturvadi, Founder and Director, Chintan; Ms Nikita Krishan, Technical Director, KPMG; and Mr OP Mathur, Visiting Senior Fellow, CESP

Dr Khosla sparked the discussion with his introductory remarks which nicely shaped the agenda of the discussion. He remarked that it is the G20 Summit on Environment that brings us together. He then shed light on the ethos of Development Alternatives (DA). Dr Khosla said that we are an organisation that has been working for the last 40 years on the issues related to environment, equity, and climate change both on ground as well as on policy level. As per him, the global environmental issues and urban issues are all correlated, and it concerns him that under the glitters of cities there are a large number of people who are left behind. Talking about the various innovations of DA, he expressed that DA building is a tribute to innovation that uses large amounts of waste materials (like Fly Ash) which is an industrial waste and low Carbon Calcined Clay Cement (LC<sup>3</sup>), which essentially reduces CO<sub>2</sub>

emission by 40% over Portland cement. The large part of DA's innovation is not just on technologies but on institutional framework to deliver eco-friendly solutions at an affordable price so that it can be adopted by the masses.

Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius began his speech by complementing DA as the champions of the agenda of the discussion. He said that role of cities for scalable construction and housing should be in the light of transition to Carbon Neutral, Resource Efficient and Circular Economy. He stated that, European Renew - the flagship initiative adopted in 2019 which tackles multiple crisis that are driven by climate change, biodiversity loss, natural resource deficiency and pollution in a systematic and coherent manner with regards to sustainable development of cities. In his opinion, to address these crises, we need to change our consumption and production pattern – starting with energy, mobility, industry, construction, and food system. Mr Sinkevičius then highlighted the shortage of quality houses,



Dr Ashok Khosla (left) with Virginijus Sinkevičius (right)

shortage of sustainable construction materials, poor water quality, excessive air pollution, noise, dust, heat, issues of waste disposal, energy availability and so on. He then said that EU estimates world population will continue to grow and will touch 10 billion, of which 70% will be living in cities by 2050, but the concern is that half of the urban infrastructures to support this does not even exist yet. He opined that it is a challenge but also a great opportunity. He also said that if we continue to build our house according to the predominant technique, the greenhouse gas emission of the sector would be huge and will challenge the achievements of the Paris Agreement. Mr Sinkevičius stressed that perhaps the most important circularity aspect comes to building is to extend the lifetime of buildings. As per him, we can save an enormous amount of materials and energy by renovating the building that we already have, as build new buildings with recycled materials is often not the best option. He emphasised on the use of secondary materials to avoid landfills. Stating that, the need of sustainability, aesthetic, social inclusion is not only for the building but for the built environment to make our cities more citizen-friendly and resilient. At the end of his speech, he highlighted the importance of nature-based solutions to reduce the risk of flood and drought. He also said that DA's initiatives clearly respond to EU's international outreach with specific action on ground.

Mr Shombi Sharp, Resident Coordinator, United Nations, started his speech with the recollection of UN's association with DA from the very beginning. He added that DA started its journey with the support from UNEP in the year 1982. Mr Sharp termed this relationship as "an amazing journey". Expressing his pleasure to work with EU for over 20 years on many different areas like air pollution, climate change, integrated aspect of environment, biodiversity protection etc. Focusing on the economic importance of India's G20 summit on SDGs, Mr Sharp emphasised on the importance of addressing poly crisis. He termed India's role as "Think Globally, Act Locally". With an optimistic note he added that India sees the great young generation of the history; more young mind than any country has ever had. He believes that India must reap the benefits of this demographic dividend.

After that, Ms Vishai Uppal, Director, Governance, Law & Policy at WWF-India added her views. Whether its biodiversity loss or infrastructure, as per her, we also need to look at what the COP15 has given to the agreement on biodiversity within the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and how do we support its depiction into not just national level but also localisation of it at the panchayat level.

She then highlighted the SDGs, particularly the SDG 1 – “No Poverty”. She also expressed her concern that there is huge gap in resource mobilisation and implementation strategies. Ms Vishaish opined that whether it is SDG finance or resource mobilisation, it is not enough to touch the target by 2030.

Mr OP Mathur, visiting Senior Fellow, CESP, was reminiscing his association with Dr Ashok since a long time (1984 to 1992) when he got elected in the National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA). He then added that way back in 1986-87, Dr Ashok had the vision to utilise waste product in building sector. Mr Mathur then said that he and Dr Ashok have been working in this area for cities and urbanisation for a very long time in different aspects of urbanisation and more recently on urban sustainability. He also highlighted UNDP and NITI Aayog’s collaborative work on the SDG goal 11. In his concluding remarks he was quite optimistic by referring NITI Aayog and UNDP report that points to a qualified success in poverty reduction.

Dr KS Casimir, Director, XLRI Delhi-NCR expressed that if India really wants to make a difference in the global scenario, first it must make change in the local perspective. Following Dr Casimir, Ms Bharati highlighted the needs of the marginal people, because these are the people who face the greatest impact of multifaceted crisis. She then put forth the plight of the poor people who have lost everything in the recent flood in the northern India. After that, Ms Bharati highlighted the importance of urban farming, particularly the women farmer. It is essential to find ways to prioritise, she added, not generic priority but priority for the people who are completely left out in plans. While talking about the vulnerable people, she explained, the importance of low-cost housing for the poor.

Mr Rabindranath said that it is needed to identify frameworks and ways to manage the impact on environment. Ms Nikita Krishan highlighted KPMG’s works on sustainable urbanisation with regards to capacity building for government officials conducted by KPMG on how to undertake metropolitan technique which is bridging the gap between the urban and rural spaces. She also referred to the global construction survey by KPMG.



Dr Ashok Khosla (left) Mr Virginijus Sinkevičius (right)

Ms Zeenat Niazi highlighted DA’s work on local, small, and micro level enterprises which form 80% of the country’s economy but are not even registered in formal economy. DA has been working on a framework that looks at how to define the triple bottom line in a manner so it can bring it into the formal economy and bring monetary aspect to these enterprises. She further added that DA is working on large scale engagement on affordable housing and circular economy to reduce embodied carbon in the state of Orissa and Maharashtra, with

support from Germany, one of the EU countries. She then highlighted the significance of non-state actors in India’s development journey – civil society, educational institutions. In her opinion these actors act as bridge between people and government institutions. Ms Niazi also expressed her view on setting up a circular lab, kind of institutional framework where many partnerships can be developed, for circular economy focused on cities.

Mr Shrashtant Patara emphasised on the importance of collaboration. In his opinion, anything we do collectively with government and private sector would be more effective. He then highlighted DA’s approach of localisation as that has the potential to support fair amount of diversity and develop local decision making capacity. Mr Patara also stressed on local entrepreneurs that are key to larger development.

To wrap up the discussion Dr Khosla remarked, “It should not be said that the government cannot accomplish the tasks, but the intervention of NGOs helps resolve the last mile issue”.