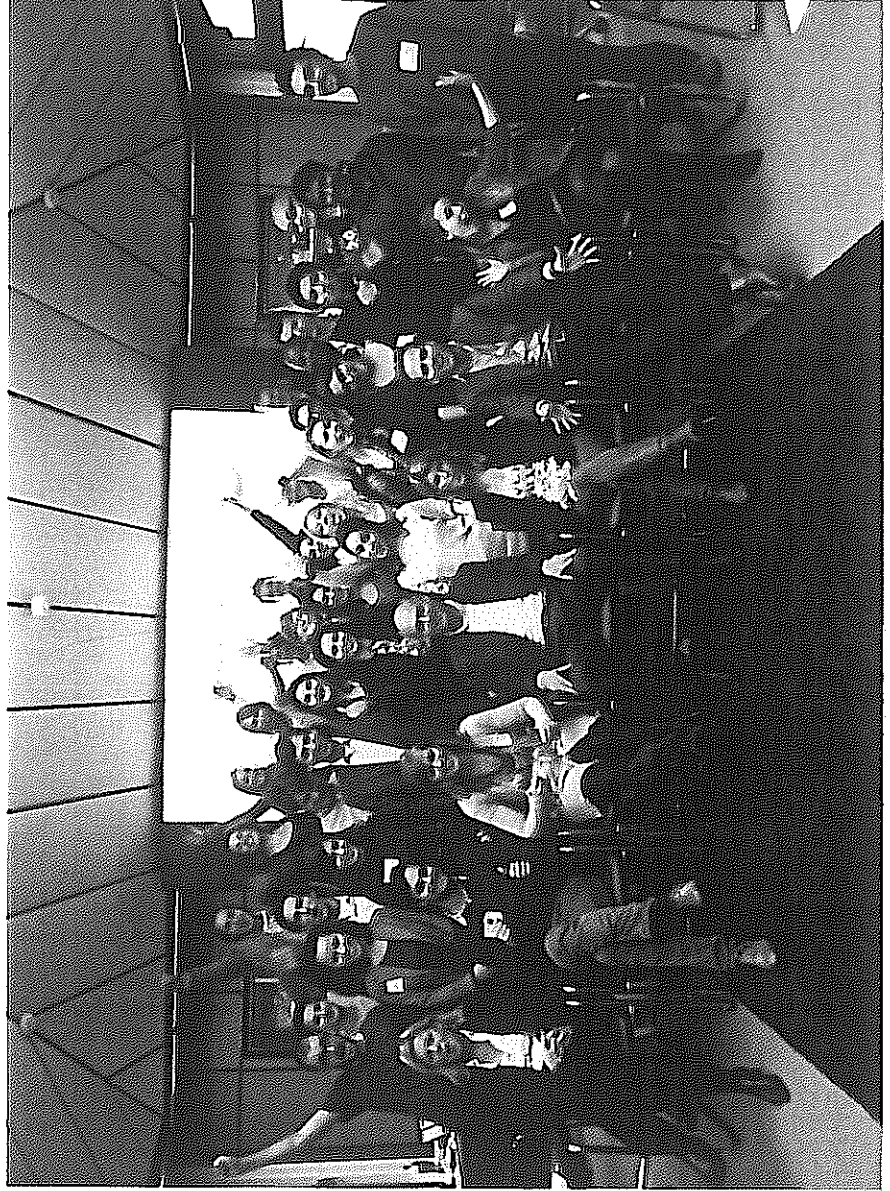
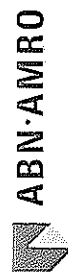


# Reality check – Take your cue from nature



In 1992, during the first Earth Summit in Rio, we – The Leaders for Economic Change – were roughly six years old. We have since grown up in a world whose stated imperative has been – and continues to be – “sustainability”. The truth, however, is that “sustainability” is not some end state to be achieved. Rather, sustainability is reality. It is the principles of sustainability – and thus, reality – that should govern not only what we create and how we act, but also how we lead.

Our current economic system is a system built on assumptions, models and half-truths. Capitalism as an economic theory in its current form leads us to believe that we all make rational decisions in our day-to-day life, based on a perfect flow of information, and that our individual and collective goal, at any given moment, is to maximise utility and to grow limitlessly.

For those of us who have grown up at a time when “sustainability” has become a household word, we are only all too aware that the current economy’s truisms are anything but. Our Earth’s resources are finite, yet are rarely valued as such. We know that not all human needs can either be rational or satiated by consumption. We have already experienced booms and busts – i.e. man-made and natural cycles – in the agriculture, oil, digital and financial industries; while we know that linear processes in nature are hard to come by, we continue to believe blindly in the concept of limitless growth and we continue to tell the story of human development in such terms.

Nature provides us with innumerable examples of sustainability: species population cycles, using “waste” to drive growth, diverse communities of mutualistic, symbiotic flora and fauna. Ecological sustainability is the natural system order of life. With the introduction of the modern economy, we now unwittingly accept a superficial layer of rules, norms and convictions for our society that disrupt natural and healthy negative feedback loops that keep

our population in check and in balance with the rest of the natural world.

Therefore, what does it mean to lead in a world in which the principles of mutualism, cyclicity and diversity are not distorted by the current doctrines of consumerism and unending growth? How do we lead the transition from one state to the other?

Being a true leader begins with personal action: a commitment to act daily on your beliefs and in a manner consistent with the reality that is sustainability. Leadership in sustainability means adopting the principles of sustainability as your own: **(1) Mutualism**. Competition encourages rivalry and gains at the expense of others and of the environment, while collaboration stimulates communities of inclusion. Facilitating these communities will be the role of the “new” leader. **(2) Cyclicity**. Leaders must be flexible and adaptive in their thinking and actions. Human development does not have a beginning, a middle, and an end – at least not yet! We cannot afford to think of our resources, companies, or colleagues in this linear way. **(3) Diversity**. Leaders in sustainability must embrace differences in culture, ideas, language, background, and beliefs of everyone around them. Simultaneously, we must make a conscious effort to include the excluded and take a hint from nature – a diverse community is stronger, more adaptive and more resilient to adversity than a homogenous one.

As change leaders, our role is not to compete with each other to be “top dog”. Leading for a sustainable world means taking our cue from nature. We must collaborate and innovate together and believe wholeheartedly that the principles of sustainability are the key to a truly prosperous and balanced world.

On behalf of the Leaders for Economic Change Programme, participant future leaders **Shoshannah Bramlett**, **Theodoros Galanos**, **Jorim Tielbeek** and **Simone Toxopeus**

wrote this contribution to the *EuroCharity Yearbook*. The programme took the thirty participants (students and young professionals) on a journey through economic change and leadership. From the belief that the current economic model cannot withstand the challenges we face today, the question of how to move towards new ideas and practices and create a shift in paradigm was central in the intensive teachings and trainings during the programme.

The **Leaders for Economic Change Programme** was initiated by Elena Lommers on behalf of **Amsterdam Bright City** and by Marjon van Opijnen and Annelien van Meer, both working at **CREM**. Amsterdam Bright City is a knowledge centre and meeting point that has extensive experience with initiating, developing and organising innovative, dynamic and exciting events and programmes that aim at bringing together (young) professionals to learn from each other’s experiences. CREM offers 20 years of experience in consultancy, research and training in the field of sustainable development on an international, national and local scale. Its key areas of expertise include CSR and chain management, biodiversity and natural resources, local sustainable development and waste management.

The Leaders for Economic Change Programme was developed and managed by Damaris Matthijssen (Economy Transformers) and Marjon van Opijnen (CREM B.V.) with great passion.

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