

# “Time is the final resource”

**PROF. FRANZ JOSEF RADERMACHER IS A MEMBER OF THE CLUB OF ROME AND A CO-FOUNDER OF THE GLOBAL MARSHALL PLAN INITIATIVE. THE PROGRESSIVE THINKER LOOKS INTO THE FUTURE AND EXPLAINS WHY HE BELIEVES IN HUMANITY’S ABILITY TO SHAPE IT TO OUR COMMON BENEFIT**

Interview MAIKE ZÜRCHER

**Prof. Radermacher, would you say that you are a visionary?**

Yes, I’d call myself a visionary.

**What is it that makes you a visionary?**

Typically, a visionary can imagine things that do not exist as yet. In my case these things tend to be future developments that could benefit humankind. My background and interests lie in mathematics and computer science, and these are disciplines that often address hypothetical ideas and constructs. I think this puts me in a good position to dream up the sort of things one expects of a visionary.

**You are an active member of the Club of Rome, which was founded in 1968. What are the fundamental differences between how the world is today and how it was back then?**

The situation back then was by no means simple, but it was a good deal more manageable than it is today. The population of the world was less than 65 percent of what it is now, and our consumption of resources was decidedly more modest. There was also a general consensus that cooperation between North and South was necessary and that nation states had an important role to play in this regard. Because of the East-West conflict, market fundamentalism was unable to assert itself. And half of the world wasn’t even participating in global economic processes or growth. For many reasons, ecological and sociological approaches were

more widespread back then. Yet there was also the very real threat of war between East and West and of Armageddon. So the world was a very different place in 1968.

**What is the Club of Rome particularly concerned with at the moment?**

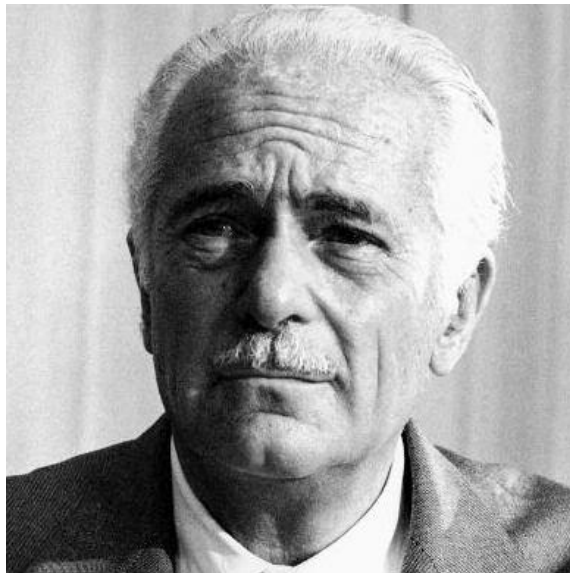
The Club of Rome addresses topics of the day that concern our future development, taking a systematic, integrated approach. This is something it has always done. It regards the problems currently being experienced by the global financial system as confirmation that its stance is the correct one. The crisis is due to inadequate governance around the world, and more importantly, to the prevailing market-based approach to questions of the economy and global development. What we need instead is a global market economy based on ecological and sociological principles that incorporates closer cooperation between North and South. More stringent rules need to be applied to the exploitation of natural resources and raw materials; we must cross-finance development; we must concentrate on the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals; and we must work to establish a balance and understanding between the world’s major cultures.

**You were one of the founders of the Global Marshall Plan Initiative. Was there a specific reason behind its inception?**

The foundation of the Global Marshall Plan Initiative was a result



*“One can only understand the potential of the future after one has learned something from the past”*



Top left: Dr. Aurelio Peccei – in 1968 the Italian scholar founded the Club of Rome with Scottish-born scientist Alexander King. Top right: German president Horst Köhler (left) with Eberhard von Koerber, co-president of the Club of Rome, on 6 November 2007 at a globalization conference in Schloss Bellevue, the presidential residence. Bottom left: Another participant at the conference – Ashok Kosla, co-president of the Club of Rome. Bottom right: Prof. Eduard Prestel (left), Dr. Aurelio Peccei (centre) and Prof. Mihajlo Mesarovic (right) at the general assembly of the Club of Rome on 14 October 1974 in Berlin

of various groupings in civil society, including the Club of Rome, coming together and realizing that a practical plan had to be laid out if we were to achieve the objectives I described earlier; this plan would function as a guideline for the many committed individuals and organizations out there. The plan would have to demonstrate how to move forward into the future using various elements, some of which already enjoy broad international support. One such element is the fulfilment of the UN's Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In 2000 an agreement to this effect was signed by 191 heads of state as part of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

**The goals are very ambitious. In your opinion, is it better to set bold targets – in everyday life as well – or do you think it is better for morale to start with smaller, more easily attainable objectives?**

Yes, the goals are ambitious. Yet they are only the beginning. Of course it is simpler in everyday life to set more manageable goals. You might build a school, or campaign for better accessibility for people in difficult situations, or fight corruption. These are all important activities and the Global Marshall Plan supports all projects of this nature, such as those initiated by Rotary International. But we also believe that the problems facing our planet cannot be solved by concentrating on individual issues. Sometimes focusing too strongly on individual topics can lead to larger issues not receiving the attention they deserve. It is essentially the same as trying to solve the whole of the world's problems starting with one person's behaviour.

**Is idealism an important driving force behind progress, or are realism and pragmatism more useful?**

Idealism is an important driving force, but it is not the only one that matters. Some people are motivated more by idealism and altruism, others by taking a realistic and pragmatic approach. It is particularly helpful if the two stances are combined into what we call “insightful selfishness”. But both of them can be positive. It's no coincidence that we work with the Global Ethic Foundation, an organization concerned with identifying the ethical principles that are common to all religions as well as to humanism. Many different things motivate people to do good.

**Are you a philanthropist; do you believe in the good in human beings?**

I believe that, in general, human beings are sociable and, above all, cooperative creatures. It is only thanks to our ability to cooperate that we have been able to survive as a species. One cannot change human nature, but we don't have to. All we need is the right environment and the right conditions. Under those circumstances humans behave quite acceptably as a general rule.

**In which epoch of human history would you like to have been alive – which one would have been most interesting to you?**

Over the past four million years humanity has gone through a lot of different situations and experiences. I am particularly interested in looking at the various conditions under which we have lived in the past in order to gain a better understanding of our lives throughout the ages to the present day. This goes as far back as our origins as a species and includes the development of our brain, language, intelligence, consciousness and technological capabilities. I am so curious to learn about all of this that I would actually like to have lived through all these epochs in one way or another. Of course, it would be better to do it from the safe perspective of today, perhaps by travelling through time and witnessing the particularly important events – from the comfort of a modern conveyance.

**What feelings do you have when you look into the future?**

In my opinion, the situation currently facing the people who live on this planet presents us with the challenge of remaining realistic under difficult circumstances. If we wish to overcome a problematic situation, we must first understand precisely what that situation is. We should know what our options are and what developments we might have to deal with. That is not a particularly pleasant prospect, even if our own personal situations are perfectly acceptable as yet. Crucial matters will be decided during the next 50 years, and the chances are good that I will have the opportunity to live through much of that time. If things start getting unpleasant, we cannot run away. That fact should motivate us to play an active role in shaping our futures positively. The chance of achieving this is not much more than 50 percent, but it is still a substantial one. There are good reasons to work together and steer the situation in our favour. Doing so will make life much more enjoyable. We can do a great deal for other people while benefitting ourselves at the same time.

**Some people have called you “a student of the future”. Has humanity really learned anything from the past that will help it do better in the future? Or are the challenges of the future so different as to make any amount of experience irrelevant?**

As I am a systems theorist and someone who explores the future, the future is something that naturally preoccupies me. However, I firmly believe that the future is linked to what has already happened. One can only understand the potential of the future after one has learned something from the past. And yes, of course, humankind learns from history, even though every individual starts afresh. The most obvious evidence of this is the governance systems that human beings have developed. We have translated our experience into structures that govern how we interact with one another and how

## Information

**Franz Josef Radermacher** was born on 20 March 1950 in Aachen, Germany. He received a doctorate in mathematics from RWTH Aachen University in 1974 and a doctorate in economics from Universität Karlsruhe (TH). He concluded his postdoctoral research in mathematics at RWTH Aachen University in 1982. Today he is the head of the Forschungsinstitut für anwendungsorientierte Wissensverarbeitung at the University of Ulm, where he is also professor of databases and artificial intelligence. He is a member of the Club of Rome and president of the Federal Association for Economic Development and Foreign Trade (BWA). In 1993 he helped found the Global Marshall Plan Initiative. His most recent book addresses the topic of human survival in the 21st century and is called “Welt mit Zukunft – Überleben im 21. Jahrhundert”. Franz Josef Radermacher is married and has one grown-up son.

**The Club of Rome** is a think tank founded by Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King in 1968 with the aim of promoting efforts to make our future sustainable and worth living. The Rome-based organization counts representatives from the worlds of science, culture, economics and politics among its members. Its central focus today is on sustainable development; it is calling upon the people of the world to change their consumption behaviour so that their needs and the needs of generations to come can be met by the limited supply of global resources. The Club of Rome thinks and acts globally and is opposed to monocausal and short-term thinking. It aims to persuade as many people as possible to live their lives in a more sustainable way. The club has 32 national associations, 22 of which are in Europe. Each one is committed to realizing these objectives. In 1972 the Club of Rome published its influential report “Limits to Growth”, which provoked a furore around the world. Since then it has regularly produced reports on the global situation.

**The Global Marshall Plan** was first devised by Al Gore in his book “Earth in the Balance”. In 2003 representatives of 19 civil society organizations came together in Frankfurt am Main to found the Global Marshall Plan Initiative. Its goals are to end poverty, raise environmental awareness and ensure its efficient implementation, and to promote health, justice and equality across the globe. In short, it aims to establish a global market economy based on ecosocial principles. The Global Marshall Plan Foundation has its headquarters in Hamburg. It is currently coordinating four main projects: The Global Contract Foundation ([global-contract.org](http://global-contract.org)), which aims to establish international framework conditions that guarantee that the world economy functions for the collective good; The Global Marshall Plan ([globalmarshallplan.org](http://globalmarshallplan.org)), which promotes a global market economy based on ecosocial principles; Global Commons ([globalcommons.org](http://globalcommons.org)), a virtual community for the exchange of views on global topics; and Plant for the Planet ([plant-for-the-planet.org](http://plant-for-the-planet.org)), where young people get together to plant trees and fight climate change.

we organize our society; from democracy to the distribution of power, from the constitutional court of law to the public referendum, from laws that regulate the authority of governments to laws that limit the power of the police, we have learned so much and made it work in our favour. One thing that represents an obvious challenge is the astonishing speed at which the global population continues to grow and technology continues to develop. These two things make the future very new territory, because these conditions have simply never existed before. This makes our experience less authoritative. As a result, we will not only need to learn new things, we will have to unlearn some of what we already know. We will have to search for solutions while retaining our experience as a valuable point of reference. At the same time, we will need to do our best to understand the new things we encounter. That is what makes the situation so difficult.

**Do you think human beings have always faced unusual and unprecedented challenges or have some periods in human history been tougher than others? And what about the present day?**

Without a doubt, human beings have always faced unusual and unprecedented challenges. Some eras are, of course, objectively easier than others. The last 10,000 years or so have been special in that conditions have been changing systematically and rapidly, as I said – in some cases extraordinarily rapidly – especially with regard to our organizational abilities and our increasing population. A typical feature of this era is that there are too many people who want more than the world can actually give. But the size of the population has kept changing over the course of history, as have people’s desires and abilities. So we are always dealing with new issues, and our knowledge about what happened in the past, which we use to deal with these new issues, is constantly improving.

**Do you have a motto that reflects your views on time?**

My life has been characterized by a lack of time and a preoccupation with the future. Einstein once said that he spent a great deal of time thinking about the future because that is where he would be spending the rest of his life. I feel the same way. Another important thing I have learned is that time heals wounds, but that wounds also need time to heal. My motto could well be: “Time is the final resource”.