

The Role of the Private Sector in Building Bridges, Building Business

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Your Highness, Lord Mayor, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all, let me say what a great pleasure it is to be here and if I may just add to the comments of others in thanking Haifa Al-Kaylani and the AIWF for the energy, enthusiasm and vision that has made this possible.

In my talk this evening I'd like to build on some of the sentiments expressed at the round-table discussions already referred to, and point to the ways where industry, government and institutions can co-operate to further the vision of the AIWF as expressed in the slogan: "Building Bridges, Building Business", and to the limited extent that I am able to do so, also to address the subject for this evening: "Building links between the City of London, the Arab World and the International Community".

The essence of my talk can be summed up by an old Chinese proverb: "If you want one year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want 10 years, grow trees. If you want 100 years, grow people". To me this encapsulates one of the most pressing needs in the Middle East today: the development – indeed not just the development, but the sustainable development – of people and skills, and this requires a particular focus, in a Middle East context, on the promotion of issues as championed by the AIWF.

I first visited the Middle East as a geology student studying for a PhD in the Oman Mountains over 30 years ago. I remember at the time that an Omani friend, noticing my impatience at the time it took to complete various administrative tasks, took me aside and explained. "Gavin", he said, "The Arabic word for tomorrow is "buccera". You must understand that it means the same as the Spanish word "manana",but without that pressing sense of urgency!"

The pace of change has however increased dramatically in recent years. This was something recognised by panellists in yesterday evening's round-table sessions. This is a period, it was argued, of great change across the Middle East: change brought about by politics, by economics, by demographics, by changing views of energy security. And as Charles Darwin put it: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change". How adaptable, we might ask, are we to this change?

Like much of the rest of industry, the Oil & Gas sector finds itself no longer "Opportunity constrained", but instead we are now "Resource constrained" and, as we increasingly strive to meet the world's insatiable demand for energy, we are also faced by the realisation, as it was put in a recent report, that: "The people are, where the projects were" – referring to the predominance of oil industry skills residing in the US and Europe. If we are to meet the challenges of the future we must ensure that those skills are transferred to the areas of the world where the projects will increasingly be in the future.

I'd like to briefly address three areas: first Diversity & Inclusiveness which is an important topic for a company like Shell for many reasons: put most simply, having a diverse workforce better reflects Shell's 20 Million customers globally. There are about 50 nationalities represented in the top 1,600 jobs around the world, which provides the company with a wealth of ideas and solutions to meet local customer needs.

The power of Diversity was brought home to me at two away-days we held for my Business Development team earlier this week. We discovered that, within the group of 42 people (roughly a third of them Arabic women), we had 27 different nationalities. Not only does this bring a wide diversity of thinking to any discussion but it was also amazing to see Iraqis and Iranians sitting down together discussing not their differences but what they had in common, and also to see a group of Kuwaiti, Saudis and Syrian staff discussing (or perhaps arguing) the best way to cook fish.

A subset of the diversity issue is the attraction of women into the workplace: A major issue facing the industry is the shortage of qualified and experienced people. Fewer people, especially in Europe and North America, pursue scientific and technical education. This I can confirm from personal experience, with two daughters studying psychology at university, a third intent on working with the environment and a fourth wanting to do, and I quote: "something to do with hedgehogs" – no engineers there I am afraid! We need to convince young people that a technical career in this industry is both stimulating and worthwhile – meeting challenges that matter to the world.

Shell's target is to have 20% of the top 1,600 jobs around the world held by women by the end of this decade. This year we kicked off, appropriately on 8th March, International Women's Day, a global campaign aimed at the recruitment of women, part of which specifically targets the Middle East.

My second point is around Learning & Development: Learning, we have discovered, is not a two-week a year exercise, but occurs 365 days a year - in line this time with an Arab proverb that says: "Seek education from the cradle to the grave".

This is an area where we seek to work closely with national governments and local institutions – with initiatives developed in the last year including the Qatar Science & Technology Park, an Oman Learning Hub and work with UKTI on the Iraq Learning Board.

This with the ultimate intent that we ensure that, by co-operation, we have the right people, in the right place, at the right time, with the right capabilities.

I'd like to close with a few comments about Sustainable Development: Ours is not a resource-intensive industry but a capital-intensive industry. This does not mean however that we cannot help to create jobs, to work towards a more sustainable future.

In Oman, Abu Dhabi and Egypt, the Intilaaqah programme stimulates and encourages young nationals to learn the skills required to start up their own businesses.

Throughout the region, well over 1000 people have been through the Intilaaqah programme and almost exactly half of these have been women - indeed the recent winner of the regional award for excellence was a woman, a young Emirati lady whose company produces traditional emirati furniture. We recently held a course focused exclusively on a women's group in Abu Dhabi and plan to shortly do the same in Iraq.

In conclusion therefore, there is growing confidence that we are witnessing a period of rapid – and largely positive – change in the region. To maximise the benefits of this change process requires extensive dialogue – something that came out strongly from the round-table session yesterday. The AIWF is to be commended for continuing to provide a forum for such dialogue. We feel that we are making progress in some areas – but there are others where we realise that we still have a lot to learn.

What we are after ultimately is sustainability. It's of note that the most sustainable project of all time, the Great Silk Roads of China and the Middle East, lasted for over 1000 years. This was in large part because everybody involved in the Silk Roads got something out of it and, in short, co-operated for the greater good. If our various enterprises in the Middle East today are to be equally sustainable, then the area where we must demonstrate the will to co-operate includes Education in all its forms.

Co-operation between industry, government and institutions has already led to successful initiatives and partnerships in the area of Higher Education and Skills/Capability development. This is an area where not just Government but also the City of London can and should play a role. Support and finance for new initiatives will lead ultimately to business growth in the region and the development of closer ties with the UK.

Where I am less sure of the way forward and where I would like to offer a challenge to those of you here this evening, is in the critical area of primary and secondary education. This is the domain of government, and not an area that private industry should be seen to interfere in. But there may be a role for others and it may be that, what I often feel is missing, a "bottom's up" approach starting with local communities may provide a way forward. I would be very interested to hear from others how industry, government and potentially academia or institutions can work together to effect a change for good in this area. Such changes need I believe to come quickly as...to quote a final Chinese proverb:

It's later than you think!