

ENCOUNTERS



Peter Holbrook: “Social enterprise has entered the collective imagination.”

A word with the head of Social Enterprise UK

“Britain ought to copy Italy’s cooperative model, especially the support that this sector has received from government.” So says Peter Holbrook, chief executive of Social Enterprise UK, the British national body for social enterprise. Founder of the multi-award-winning community project Sunlight Development Trust, Holbrook was made a CBE at the end of February in the new year’s honours list for services to social enterprise, conferred by Prince William in person. Here to present the Social Enterprise World Forum, organised by ACRA with the Cariplo foundation and IULM University, Holbrook explained the ingredient that Italy could add to make the social economy the country’s primary sector.

What should British social enterprise take from its Italian counterpart, and what should we Italians introduce into our own country?

We Brits need to attract the support and attention from government that the cooperative movement has had here in Italy.

We have used Italian cooperation as a model to show what can be done to strengthen the role of social enterprises and cooperatives in the public services. In the last five years in Britain, around 100,000 public spaces, from buildings and schools to unused land, have been handed to social enterprises to use, which has greatly encouraged communities’ entrepreneurial spirit. I would encourage Italy to do likewise: governments have a great many buildings but scant resources to make them operational – and, often, little imagination.

Giving them to the people means offering a new opportunity for growth and a fresh start.

Where is the social economy at in Great Britain? Does this Big Society work?

It is very hard to disagree with what the Big Society is trying to achieve. But the media and many traditional organisations jumped to the conclusion that the aim was only to cut public services, by forcing volunteers to handle everything. The Big Society’s reputation has now been damaged, so much so that no one even uses the term any more. What remains, though, is the ambition for citizens, non-profit organisations and social enterprises to have a more central role in public services, and that is a good thing.

For too long, we have expected governments to do everything; now we must recognise the part that we ourselves can play in creating the solutions our countries need.

What is the social economy’s most important achievement in Great Britain in the last five years?

We have brought the social economy into the mainstream, firing the imagination of millions of students and young entrepreneurs.

People setting up a new business now consider whether to establish a private company or a social enterprise. One British start-up in five is a social enterprise, and the interesting thing is that they are no longer confined to the service sector, for their scope has expanded considerably. We have social businesses that make clothes and chocolates, and this is a great leap forward in a very short space of time.

Speaking of social-economy growth, which other country would you say is one to watch?

South Korea. The last Social Enterprise World Forum took place there. South Korea has escaped the crisis that has ravaged the west. The economy is still growing, and this growth has been a factor in huge social inequalities opening up. The government has set up an agency to promote social enterprise as part of a strategy to bring greater harmony and balance to the overall economy and to make the country fundamentally fairer and more inclusive.

What are you expecting from Social Enterprise World?

An honest debate on the major tensions in the sector, especially on the role of investors and where their control of social businesses might lead. And the most brilliant people from the sector, academia and politics are coming to Milan; the Italian government must recognise the huge opportunities that are emerging. It will be a chance to reinvigorate everyone’s passion for the social economy.

EVENTS

1000 DELEGATES COMING TO MILAN

Over 1000 delegates from all over the globe are set to descend on the Social Enterprise World Forum organised by the ACRA-CCS foundation in Milan from 1 to 3 July 2015.

Entrepreneurs, investors, philanthropists and government representatives will meet to discuss the big issues for the sector’s development. The 2015 edition, entitled “Growing a New Economy”, sees the Forum return to Europe for the first time since the inaugural event in 2008 in Edinburgh. It will open at the Expo Auditorium and continues on the other two days at IULM University.