A Deep-Seated Debate
by Stefano Zara

The subject of social responsibility of enterprises dates back to early modern notions of enterprise itself, although this has been acknowledged only recently. As Schumpeter explained, an enterprise subverts the natural order to produce wealth, and therefore creates turbulence within the environment it comes in contact with. Its impact on the surrounding environment, which can never be neutral, has been the subject of vigorous

debate for a long time. I remember reading the text of a heated confrontation in the first years of 19th century between the followers of the Enlightenment and Stendhal about the social utility of business (or rather of industry) – and the word "social" had a rather broad meaning, as it does today.

Therefore, innovation does not regard *whether* enterprise has social responsibility or not, nor the debate on this question, but rather *how to make social responsibility an explicit value* to be pursued. Business achieves this latter objective through certain instruments: ethical codes and charters of values, as well as the certification of several aspects of a business – which could be the codes themselves, the social and environmental assessment, etc.

I think these two levels of social responsibility – we might call them *the social aims* of business, and *the tools to certify and assess them* – should never be mixed up. It is very important that the attention to social aims is not satisfied by the existence and adoption of assessment tools. Let's not forget that some of the most certified companies (Enron, for instance) were responsible for infamous criminal actions.

On the other hand, we should not be as pessimistic as Prof. Guido Rossi, a recognized scholar on this subject. In several papers, the most significant of which, not by chance, was called *The Epidemic Conflict* (ed. Adephi), he stated that ethics and business are structurally incompatible; therefore, neither law, nor certification, nor any authority can provide a reliable outcome. According to Rossi, the one and only solution would be the dawning of a new Renaissance, of an "individual and collective jumpstart" of morality.

While appreciating Rossi's analysis, I personally think that each element – the debate on business, the law, and the tools to govern business, competition and market – contributes to building a general consciousness that strives to attain compatibility between the principal role of business – economic development – and social and environmental goals.

The path is long and arduous (and trans-national, since the advent of globalisation), but if we do not follow it, then enterprise and even progress itself are at risk of losing credibility and imploding into an unpredictable and therefore disquieting future.

The globalisation of the world's economy has exceeded the capability of single countries to regulate and monitor trade. If it is difficult to keep track of the international trade of goods, it is even more difficult to monitor international economic transactions. For example, the outsourcing of production and tax shelters are ways to evade rules and restrictions. This is

where a far-reaching political and civil commitment is needed in order to fill a steadily increasing ethical gap.

The "jumpstart" that Rossi calls for means that both national governments and the EU, must soon take a firm stand towards making ethics and social/environmental sustainability converge with business, enterprise and production.