



ROME AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Many of these goals were already on the radar of the Romans, and they experimented with innovative approaches to achieve them. How did they do?

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DESIGN for CHANGE



POVERTY

Poverty was widespread and unquestioned as a fact of life in Rome. The Romans embraced a class system in which there were some people who were rich, others who had enough, and others constantly struggled to get by.



ZERO HUNGER

The Romans introduced a system of public welfare that guaranteed 2 pounds of bread a day for every citizen who applied. This governmental generosity did not apply to slaves and non-citizens, but the leaders understood the basic idea that an elected government is stable when its voters are well fed.



GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Romans were the first civilization to introduce a public health system. Sewers, baths and fresh water systems were built across the empire to ensure cleanliness and prevent disease. The new aquaducts and sewers had a handy public relations side effect, for they demonstrated to the population that there was much to be gained from Roman rule.



EDUCATION

The Romans copied their education system from the Greeks and had a focus on educating people for active civic life. It was only accessible to the wealthy at the time, but elements of the framework are alive across the world today.



GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality was not even anywhere near the Roman radar screen. Woman and girls did not vote or receive an education.



CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

The Romans built the first large-scale water-management system for cities in its aquaducts, public baths and sewage canals.



ENERGY SYSTEMS

The main source of energy throughout the history of Ancient Rome was firewood and the work of farm animals pulling tools. The energy systems did not keep up with the demands of a growing population.



WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The Roman system enabled economic growth, but it was not inclusive, nor was much of the work decent. The Roman agricultural and engineering system relied on large numbers of slaves who were captured during military campaigns.



INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The Romans were the world's best infrastructures builders and fostered innovation at grand scale for centuries.



REDUCED INEQUALITY

One might say that the Roman empire reduced inequality among the countries that were part of the empire: they had access to goods, markets, institutions that accelerated their own economic development.



SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Rome itself was very inclusive, but it became over-crowded and full of filth and disease. Romans built cities across their empire with a template of infrastructure to serve and protect the population.



CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

The Romans' inability to ensure sustainable consumption drove their military conquests. As the population of Rome increased, the firewood and grains of the city itself were not enough to support the needs of the people. Conquering neighboring countries became the Roman's favorite tool to gain access to the resources they needed.



CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change was a reality in Rome, although it was not induced by human behavior. In a small ice-age of AD, the temperatures decreased significantly and the agricultural systems could not adapt, leading to a decline in agricultural production.



LIFE BELOW WATER

A core figure of the Roman religion was Poseidon, the god of the seas. In worshipping Poseidon and his powers, the Romans always conducted their endeavors at sea in recognition of the rights of the sea to be respected. In addition, their fishing systems were not developed enough to deplete the waters.



LIFE ON LAND

The Romans were miserably bad at forest management. As they built cities, they deforested wide stretches of land, driving up the price of wood and causing erosion of the soil. This weakened the economy and accelerated the decline of the empire.



PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

The Romans were brilliant at creating systems of accountable government, stable institutions and reliable justice systems.



PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

The Roman empire collapsed because its leaders did not create a partnership for sustainable development. The economy relied on territorial expansion, and the wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a few. This system fell apart when the empire stopped expanding, and citizens suddenly were hit with higher taxes and inflation. People across the empire felt like being a part of the Roman system was no longer valuable to them. For lack of partnership, and for lack of sustainability, a system of innovation and strong civic minded institutions fell apart and its ideas and walls fell into decay for over a thousand years.

