

How the coronavirus crisis could speed up the transition to a more sustainable, innovative and greener deal

Covid: the great accelerator

Jacolien Eijer, managing director of Kon. NLIngenieurs, in conversation with Roberto Carpaneto, chairman and CEO of Rina Consulting. Both are EFCA board members.

It is hardly a positive scenario. As you read this, the uncertainties surrounding Covid-19 remain, its overall impact on our lives and economies is unclear, and the full extent of the restrictions imposed by governments is still unknown.

And yet, the experiences across Europe of many consulting engineers suggest this extraordinary crisis has served as a catalyst in the move to a new world, where sustainability, more efficient infrastructure, heightened mobility and digitalisation are the key influences in the race for new engineering contracts, both private and public.

It doesn't mean the experiences across Europe are uniform. With perspectives from both North (Netherlands) and South (Italy), a picture emerges of considerable change and innovation, but in some different ways.

In one area above all, though, Jacolien Eijer and Roberto Carpaneto, are in unison: Covid has changed everything, and proved one thing – we must adapt, we can adapt, and we are adapting.

"In one weekend, we changed

our system of working," says Eijer. "Working from home, working online, digitalisation. We always said 'these changes would make life better, but it will never happen'. Well, we did it, overnight. And that opens a window; many people think that if you can change these things, what other systems can we change overnight?"

NEW POSSIBILITIES

Roberto Carpaneto agrees on this point. "As engineering consultants we have demonstrated a great capability to reorganise ourselves. In fact, many of us were already prepared without even really knowing we were ready. We were considering the changes but the timing caught us by surprise.

"Suddenly we found it difficult sending our people out to, say, Israel, the UK, the US. So we changed business models, we embraced the digital revolution."

Which is all very well. But not much use if the rest of the world is paralysed by Covid.

But that didn't happen in the construction sector, says Carpaneto. "Private clients – more than public – have accelerated their tender processes, bid evaluations and the like for big projects," he says.

"It was a reaction, to keep business going – I'm not sure if it was a nervous reaction, or more considered, but big firms, like oil or energy distribution companies, have stepped up the number of tenders. Yes, there was a switch-off for a while, but I would reckon

the industry is only 10-15% down on where it would have been, and that's at a time when there was nothing happening for one or two months."

Carpaneto points to a drive towards more ESG (Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance-led) projects, as recognition grows that carbon emissions can come down, and indeed did so ("Europe was so clean, cities were cleaner than we thought possible", he notes). And that has led to new projects being pushed.

Carpaneto says, "Recently in Italy, one of the largest projects announced for CO₂ capture and injection has been by ENI in eastern Italy.

"We've also been looking at transport infrastructure, driven by the impact of Covid. For example, at Rina we have been considering train carriages – is it better to have one carriage with space for 20 passengers, or two with space for ten passengers each. The positive news is that engineering consultants are the ones who can provide the innovative thinking needed."

But where Carpaneto observed the private sector moving swiftly, Jacolien Eijer saw things differently.

"It was the other way round for us," she remarks. "At the start of the crisis, Schiphol Airport, for example, which is undergoing a major rebuild, came to a halt. Yet the Monday after lockdown was declared, I could contact the necessary government ministries and work together with them. We immediately talked about keeping up the flow of work, to avoid employees being laid off. We even increased the workflow to keep contractors going, and actually had to slow down at a certain point, to ensure there would be work for next year too."

Nor did the construction sector ask for the government's financial help to stay afloat. "Just invest in infrastructure and housing, we said, because that way you



Everyone knew it was impossible until a fool who didn't know came along and did it."

Albert Einstein

get something for your money. We also asked our clients to be bold about their requirements for sustainability, to challenge us to come up with innovative ideas for new buildings. It is very important that by working together we meet the goals of the EU Green Deal, which our government incorporates into national regulations."

A CHANGING ATTITUDE

A striking shift, as Eijer notes, given the government's previous attitude of leaving it to the marketplace to set goals for issues such as sustainability.

For Roberto Carpaneto, the influx of public investment money is only now coming into view, with the EU having settled on the size and the model of its Covid Recovery Fund.

"We have to make the right choices now," he says. "We have to hit high-level targets, bringing down emissions by 40%, where housing is responsible for 30% of those emissions.

"Energy production, mobility, housing, food production, creating a more environmentally-friendly product; we are in the middle of this phase now, and engineering consultants are working through their national associations to provide the ideas, the technologies to achieve the goals. This is a great opportunity not just to 'engineer' solutions, but to define and find those solutions."

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