Due Respect and Deserved Recognition

In what has been described as a show trial rife with procedural irregularities, a lower court in Turin, Italy, sentenced Dr. Stephan Schmidheiny in February for “intentional omission of safety and health measures in Italian factories,” related to the production of asbestos there several years ago. Although we are confident that higher courts will overturn this decision, we want to make clear our moral support for Stephan Schmidheiny and to express our appreciation for his many contributions to Latin America and to the global sustainability movement.

We know Stephan Schmidheiny as an ethical and visionary business leader who in the 1970s risked his family fortune to responsibly exit the holdings he inherited in the asbestos industry, an effort he completed in 1986, well before there was consensus on the material’s adverse effects or any ban on its production in Italy or anywhere else.

His responsible and forward-looking actions as a businessman gained him the recognition of his peers, and he was invited to be the Commissioner of the industrial sector by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Co-Chair of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (known as the “Earth Summit”) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The essence of his message was that business leaders should do their part in “changing course” toward more sustainable and equitable development.

Author in the 80’s of seminal articles and books related to eco-efficiency and sustainable development, Dr. Schmidheiny decided to lead by example, becoming the founder and first president of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and shortly thereafter the creator of Fundación Avina, a unique philanthropic model in Latin America that has benefitted thousands of social and environmental organizations in the region thanks to his vision, support and partnership.

Committed to sustainability in Latin America, in 2003 he went on to create Viva Trust, an organization with a social and environmental mission to which he donated all his productive assets in the region –including his shares in the companies Amanco, Plycem and Masisa. The financial returns achieved from Viva’s assets and for-profit investments provide a permanent source of funds for sustainable development in Latin America, most notably through support for Fundación Avina and other innovative actions to improve conditions in Latin America.

In addition to his work with WBCSD, Fundación Avina and Viva Trust, Dr. Schmidheiny has been an important source of resources and strategic support to a list of other global organizations such as Ashoka, Endeavor, the World Resources Institute, INCAE Business School and its Latin American Center for Competitiveness and Sustainable Development, FUNDES and the Alliance for Global Sustainability (a partnership of MIT, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden and the University of Tokyo), among many other projects both of local importance and of global reach.
Through the support of Dr. Schmidheiny and the institutions he founded, thousands of leaders and organizations in Latin America have launched and promoted some of the most relevant environmental and social causes of our time. Examples include Corporate Social Responsibility movement, Social Entrepreneurship, inclusive business, sustainable cities, recycling cooperatives, responsible water management and the protection of the Amazon and the South American Chaco, among many other initiatives of national impact and regional importance.

In recognition of the above and in response to the disinformation surrounding the trial in Turin, we simply want to express our appreciation and respect to Dr. Stephan Schmidheiny as an ethical entrepreneur, visionary leader and humanitarian, who has demonstrated by example what it means to be social and environmentally responsible.

We sign this declaration as a sign of support for him and the causes he has championed, and as a sign of recognition for the key role he has played in the history of the global sustainability movement.