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Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

8 pg.

POPULATION AND QUALITY OF LIFE INDEPENDENT COMMISSION



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Obviously, when we talk about “population and quality of life” - the title given to the Commission by those who set it up - we are immediately qualifying population and therefore, right from the beginning, the Commission has considered quality of life to be its goal. We can say that quality of life qualifies the concept of population from the outset. At the same time, the often-stated link between population, development and the environment leads to an assertion of the particular nature of the “population” factor.

What do I mean by this? For many currently working on population issues, the existence of a very clear interaction between population, aspects of development and environmental issues, means that these factors are used interchangeably and seen as being mutual causes and effects. However, while there is certainly a close interdependence between these factors, there is also no doubt that the population factor has its own particular nature. The population factor is not the same as the development factor or the environment factor, because the subject of the population factor has always been human beings in their social relations, or rather, in their social reality, their social manifestation.

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I have the strong impression that what I have just said is self-evident for Latin-Americans; however, it does not appear to be so evident in specialist publications on population issues.

In a recent analysis of the greenhouse effect at the global level, a well-known specialist on population issues stated that the greenhouse effect was linked to population concentrations and made the following simplistic and really rather unscientific statement: “As it is very difficult to work on the other factors that contribute to the greenhouse effect, for example renewable energy sources to replace fossil fuel energy, let us therefore reduce the impact of the population factor.” This is an old argument, isn't it? If everyone had the same standard of living, there would be an enormous number of cars. “Therefore,” some people say “let us not reduce the production of cars, let us instead reduce the number of people.”

It is this sort of false reasoning, this feeling that things and people take pride of place, that the Commission totally rejects, and says instead: “Population is different from all other factors”, although the presence of the human factor in the others - “development” and “environment” - is

also decisive. On the other hand, throughout the preparation of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, there has also been, in various disciplines, an increasing understanding of the social reality, an awareness of population issues within a wider and deeper framework than that provided by demography.

It is a great pity that Elza Berquo (??) has not yet arrived, as she would certainly state, in a much clearer way, the view that we heard expressed in one of our Public Hearings (the last one, which took place in India with countries from South Asia). One of the participants, from Sri Lanka, said: "In order to approach population issues seriously, it is essential to abandon demography in isolation and embark on the intersection of demography with sociology, with anthropology, with all the sciences that are concerned with human beings and social reality." This represents a dismantling of what has been the institutional framework of the science of demography, which all of us see as very important.

Furthermore, we can also see that the paramount importance that has been given to economics over the last two centuries, not only as a means but as an end, has finally led to the subordination of human issues to indicators of economic crisis, which for a long time have been GNP, as an index of wealth, and, in the language of every man and woman in the political world, inflation, as the determining factor of greater or lesser access to that wealth.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

While there is no doubt that these factors are extremely important, they should also be subordinated to a much stronger human reality. I think the main struggle for some men and women politicians in the last 20 or 30 years has been precisely the attempt to place people at the centre of the actual economic process in such a way that, when establishing public policy, social policies do not follow in the wake of economic policies, designed as a rule simply as a corrective measure or in an attempt to resolve difficulties with economic policies, but rather that they should be autonomous policies capable of driving other policies, particularly economic policies.

It is interesting to note that changes in the actual concept of development are leading in this direction. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), which is currently the spearhead of the United Nations Organisation in respect of the conceptual framework of development, has for four years not hesitated to formulate its report in terms of what is called "human development", and we can see that each new stage brings human beings closer to the centre of concerns.



So it is against this background that our Commission has been working and trying to widen its mandate. We can say that, for us, population issues already constitute a priority, what we call the "dynamic population balance", to which everything else should be subordinated.

And what do we mean by this dynamic population balance? If we analyse all civilisations, we see that there are certain elements, very evident in Greek tragedies for example, which are determining components of civilisations. These are balances between men and women, old people and children, between the real world and the world beyond what can be perceived. But should we stop there, at men and women, old people and children? We have also inherited, from industrial society and civilisation, another type of balance, the balance between those who are able to guarantee their own subsistence through paid work, and those that the community has in some way to take care of financially. But there is also a fourth balance, in the population dynamic, which is the balance between man and things, or between the society of man and nature.

It seems to me that this vision, a vision of a multiple balance of individual and collective actors, is absolutely fundamental in order to be able to establish appropriate policies. It obviously places us a long way upstream of the lesser aspects of so-called "population issues". This dynamic population balance results, on the one hand, from individual attitudes, and on the other, is the object of public policies which organise, regulate, and in the final analysis, serve society.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

I have some questions that I would like to share with you concerning the dominant factors of these public policies. In the first place, to speak of public policies already implies state intervention, but the type of intervention raises a series of questions at a time when, in every part of the world, including your own continent as I have realised from reading the newspapers these last weeks, it is state intervention in which "the State increasingly places itself within a framework of economic deregulation". And it is precisely this preoccupation with deregulation, which began in the eighties and in the northern hemisphere is called, paradoxically, "structural adjustment" (the same term that has subsequently been used for programmes recommended for countries in the South), that has come, in successive stages, to dominate international life.

And it is against this background of current deregulation that we raise the question of how to achieve more state intervention? How to achieve a state with initiative? How to achieve a state capable of regulating? And capable of regulating what? If the vision that I spoke of earlier is to be translated into public policies, public intervention cannot, precisely because it needs to guarantee a balance, be approached in a purely vertical manner, the approach that is still



4

dominant. If we analyse the preparation for the Cairo Conference, it is still this verticality of approach that is in evidence, which ends up being translated into a very specific prescription of services, for example establishing a particular type of family planning service at a particular place. We want, in fact, to counter this traditional vertical way of thinking about public intervention with a horizontal approach to policies which allow for a dynamic of population balance.

And I must say that there is at the moment a rapid growth in experiments and theoretical discussion on horizontality. The most interesting that I have seen is work being done in India on science, society and development which involves all policies, including transport and industry, with the population issue at the centre, and it is the horizontal interaction of these policies which forms the dynamic of population balance.

Verticality of approach has to be completely overcome in co-ordinated policies which intersect in their practical application. We can now ask: "But how can the State bring about this type of action? How can the State determine such public policies?" These are not purely theoretical or conceptual questions about the State or civil society. The question is a very practical one, to the extent that all external intervention that has been made in the field of population issues, having been negotiated at state level, will inevitably atomise the action of each state.

What do I mean by this? For example, in Mali, at the time of the Commission's second Public Hearing there, the schools were paralysed because the budget, purely and simply, did not allow for the teachers to continue to be paid, in a breakdown of the public system. And when, during our work there, we tried to find out from the Director-General of Primary Education how the issue was being dealt with, he made reference to external aid. In this particular case, there were three sources of bilateral aid from countries in the North, and a further three from public and private international agencies. Each one had its own way of working, its own conditions, its own methodology. How could this poor Director-General carry out an integrated policy?

This is the great paradox of what is thought to be an aid to development and to population issues. This is where we can make some contribution, but only if we formulate in clearer terms what state intervention can or should be in this field. As far as population issues are concerned, it is not just a question of reducing fertility rates in the way the issues have been interpreted in line with the philosophy adopted in the preparation for the Cairo Conference. As I think I have been



trying to stress with this vision of population balance, it is a question of dealing with the deeper and more symbolic balances in each society.

These are therefore vital questions for civil society and for every state. Just as every state has so forcefully proclaimed its sovereignty with regard to its material wealth, they should do so even more with regard to their human wealth and their cultural and symbolic wealth. We are left, therefore, with the first question regarding the state: how does it formulate its public policies? How can these policies be approached in a horizontal way, the only really effective way?

But it is not just a question of the State. There is also a connection here with the dominant economic logic, by virtue of the link I spoke of earlier between population, development, and the environment. Three weeks ago, at a large conference organised by the UNDP in Sweden, our colleague Juan Somavia (who cannot be with us because of the work involved in the preparation of the Social Development Summit) said that it was necessary to reverse the dominant logic. This is our objective, and it has been a constant objective of the work of the Commission, to try to find ways to reverse this logic.

Clearly, there are two ways which are plain for all to see: the direct fight against poverty and the search for new patterns of production and consumption. It seems to us that if we attack these two aspects, not only will we certainly contribute towards eradicating the suffering of millions of people, but we will also in some way contribute to the reversal of the logic. This is because, following the public consultations we have had, we now have a very clear understanding that quality of life cannot be achieved through the theories and practices that are available within the world of economic thinking. We need diversification, and therefore, through the influence of the rest of the Latin-American continent, we are moving, or trying to move, towards the idea of specific strategies to combat poverty which can be developed in parallel with a competitive economic strategy, a strategy that will naturally remain dominant. Obviously, these strategies will include an analysis of the informal sector as part of a type of economy that we can call subsistence if you like (but which isn't at all). But this is not the only form of economy; there is credit for small-scale initiatives, redistribution of land, basic services established with the participation of the poor, infrastructures for medium-sized cities. We would like to submit all of this to your experience, for your consideration.

What does this mean? Does it have substance? Is it sufficiently realistic? Furthermore, as I discussed earlier with Sr. Melendez Ortiz (??) before we started this session, it also seems to us



that the idea of markets has become an almost metaphysical one, in spite of its being so material, in the sense that one always talks about a market as an abstract entity, an entity in itself, and as if it were the only place for everyone. However, it is very clear to us now that if the global market is the only place for everyone competing against one another, then more and more people will be excluded and marginalised.

Thus, our question is this: is it not important to begin to see the problem not only in terms of the global market, but in terms of regional markets and even in the diversity of local markets? This has nothing to do with revivalism. It is not a question of doing what we do in my country for example, old traditional fairs which have been held in the same place for centuries. It has nothing to do with that. It is a question of possibilities, forms of exchange which are viable in different communities. Basically, the aim is the demystification of the market as an all-encompassing element of economic life, the market as it is understood and institutionalised through the International Trade Organisation.

Besides, it is, of course, not only extreme poverty which concerns us; it is also the fact that, 20 years ago, the southern hemisphere was still seeking development models which were faithful to their various cultures. This was a time of endogenous development, the time of the declaration of a new international economic order, whose protagonists were Mexico and Algeria, and arising in Latin America as well.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

Today, in contrast to what occurred 20 years ago, the model which is dominant in the northern hemisphere, imitated to such effect by the Asian Tigers, has become the model from which all peoples seem to take inspiration. This means that the problems of production and consumption that are already being encountered in the northern hemisphere will gradually extend over the whole planet. This leads us to ask the following question: how are we going to reverse, to change, the logic of patterns of production and consumption? I emphasise production and consumption because consumption cannot be seen in isolation. Production in conjunction with consumption make up one unit which has its own rationale stemming from the industrial age.

Here again, we can state, or at least say we think that there are certain dominant factors which obviously need to be analysed and studied in depth. It is clear that there is not, or at least we have not found it yet, an economic theory which enables us to progress with much confidence in this field, but we have no doubt that at each step we will encounter new aspects and that it will be possible to develop such a theory, as soon as someone has discovered how to formulate it.



Our aim - and this is an aspiration of non-governmental organisations in Europe - is therefore to try in a very radical and forceful manner to reorientate the whole process of production and consumption that has been developed over the last two centuries in the northern hemisphere and in the northern part of the southern hemisphere.

But obviously, what I am saying about poverty and about patterns of production and consumption comes up against obstacles and great difficulties, inasmuch as economics nowadays seems to be understood as an extremely monolithic, doctrinaire system. When speaking about economics, everyone has the same rules, the same laws, the same instruments. So I wonder if we are not experiencing, in fact, the full legacy of the Cold War which we have not analysed properly. During the Cold War, we constantly witnessed violent confrontation between centrally planned economies and market economies. Inevitably, this confrontation led to the ideas themselves always being seen in reductionist terms.

With the disappearance of centrally planned economies, we are left with the market economy which is still seen in these reductionist terms and which continues to present the same monolithic reality. Our question is this: is it not possible to break with this dogmatism and reorientate the aims of the economy, while at the same time diversifying the ways in which it operates?

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

This seems fundamental to us as we are convinced - and all the data in, for example, the latest UNDP report show this quite clearly - that if we try to follow exactly the models that have been defined and developed and put into practice in the northern hemisphere, it is clear that we will be heading towards a major collapse of the economic system itself, resulting in great wealth, or pockets of wealth, in some areas, North and South, but with the North in the South and the South in the North¹, with an inevitable increasing marginalisation of various sectors of society.

So, these are the issues that seem to us fundamental to a dynamic population balance, on the one hand the State and on the other, the economic system. This is why one aspect that we have seen in the preparation for the Cairo Conference is very important. On population issues, there was undeniably a much greater emphasis placed on the primacy of individuals, their decisions, their choices. However, this also leads us to raise some questions. In the first place, what are the elements that make choices possible? As one woman said at one of the Public Hearings we held: What does it mean, to empower women, if all around everything conspires against the exercise of

¹ I am unclear as to the meaning of this last phrase and have therefore translated it literally.



this power? Also, what does it mean if we try to proclaim the individual as being at the heart of decisions and choices, when in fact the social context is heading towards a mass society in which the individual is lost? Where is the assertion of the individual person?

It seems to me as well that the expression of this very positive concern of the Cairo Conference has somehow been appropriated by official bodies, particularly in respect of women. I would not be surprised if in Cairo all the government representatives will be saying: "We need to contribute to the empowerment of women", as if the very word 'empowerment' represented a trickle-down effect, an effect that comes from the top down. It is without doubt an effect that requires certain conditions within society, but above all it is an operation which begins within the individual. Taking power begins with the intrinsic power of the individual and this is really where there is still much work to be done and issues to be raised.

But at the same time, one last question may be fundamental in population issues: if the unique position of individuals is guaranteed in their decisions and choices, how will individual choices will expressed collectively? How can a balance, this dynamic population balance within society, be at the same time the cause and effect of individual choices? How do the two dimensions interconnect? In other words, how does each generation produce society? How is society remade and reconstituted in different and new ways?

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