

FROM NUMBERS TO QUALITY OF LIFE



A revolution took place in the Cairo Conference. People - with their lives, feelings, needs, aspirations, hopes - took back their place at the center of the population-development equation. No science, no technology, no State policy, no development agency program can replace their right and capacity to decide their own destiny.

In the years preceding the Conference, uneasiness had already been felt about the approaches followed in many "population programs". Important as demography is in providing warning signals about the growth, composition and movement of populations, it was not enough to design integrated policies. By not taking into account other interrelated aspects of the quality of life of people, it could even lead to a distortion of the more encompassing goals of development. This could be clearly seen in many situations where the agents of "population programs" and the agents of "development projects" run parallel courses. Moreover the well-elaborated and balanced decisions of previous Population Conferences, specially the Bucharest Program of Action, were far from being implemented at the national level or taken up in the International Development Strategies.

In the Public Hearings conducted by the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life, particularly in South Asia and in Latin America, the voices were loud and clear about the "social cost" of one-sided, not-integrated "population programs". Their analysis was sharp: "looking at the population situation as a problem of numbers has seriously damaged the quality of life of people living in the countries where the population control programs are promoted". Their advice was even stronger: "the obsession with numbers, percentages, ratios, has to be given up if people themselves have to come first". Women felt stronger than anybody else the consequences of the quantitative, non-participative, and therefore alien programs. In the words of a Bangladesh young woman: "Women have children, they don't have population!"

New concepts and new approaches were needed. A more integrated formulation of the population problem was asked for. Both "alternative policy framework"¹ and "reinvigorating analysis of the relationship population-development"² had become obvious cornerstones of efficient population policies. What was at stake was more than the reinforcement of existing "population activities". It was a redefinition of the population problem, a redefinition which would take into account the many dimensions of the problem.

¹ T.K.Sundry Ravindran, "Women and the politics of population and development in India", in "Reproductive Health Matters", n.1, 1993, pg.26-38

² Paul Demeny, "Population and development", IUSSP Distinguished Lecture Series, 1994

The Cairo Conference contributed decisively to this redefinition. Most of all because it resituated the global population question as a positive challenge to the world community. And it did so, not as a prolongation of malthusian concerns of the past but as a courageous commitment to the future.

Indeed, unable as we appear to be, at the world level, to share resources and to organize our institutions so as to include the 1.3 billion human beings who live under total destitution, how are we going, in the next 30 years, to care for the 3 billion who will be brought into life by the generations in the reproductive age?

An important step was made in Cairo - the central place of women at all levels of the population question was consensually acknowledged. By giving priority to the autonomy of women's decision-making in the chain of human reproduction, the international community has pledged its political will to more than eliminating discrimination against women, to even more than reaffirming their rights. It has committed itself to the public policies capable to support a coherent population policy. This is particularly evident in the decisions concerning the establishment of social policies.

This won't be easy to implement. We are still lacking a widespread understanding that social policies are a most important guarantee of the primacy of democracy over the diktats of the market. With the idea that social rights are merely indicative and not of an immediate responsibility of the public policies, most Governments are often not consistent in the definition and implementation of social policies. At the most, social policies are estimated to be corrective of the shortcomings of the economy in periods of crisis. Seldom are they considered to be pivotal to governments' programs.

In such a context, new insights on the role of social policies in the effectiveness of realistic population and quality of life goals are urgently required. If we want to respond to the new demands of the population question, there is no short-cut: social policies have to become the hard core of political action. Healthy and educated human beings will be able to make enlightened choices in all realms of their lives, to care for others and for nature and to shape their own society .

Among social policies, women's education and health are known to be decisive elements in women's capacity to determine their own reproductive life. Indeed, how is it possible to launch family planning programmes respectful of women's quality of life when we see the figures of utter destitution? How to introduce efficient new technologies asking for medical supervision in countries (like all the countries south of Sahara) where there is one medical doctor for 36,000 inhabitants? Where sanitary facilities are nonexistent and there is no access to water? How to abilitate women with their reproductive rights when their scholarization still reaches



less than 20% in countries like Mali?

We face here huge difficulties. Several decades of development effort didn't erase yet women's illiteracy. The awareness of the acute consequences of the lack of schoolarization on fertility rates provides more than an incentive to strengthen education programs. It compels the governments to move forcefully in the direction of innovative, multimedia ways to ensure women everywhere the basic education they are entitled to. It can represent a much needed turning point in the universal right of access to education.

Likewise, reproductive rights demand new approaches to the safeguard and protection of reproductive health. As part of a panoply of fundamental human rights and guarantees (the right to inviolability of the human body, the right to the protection of the family and the right to health care) reproductive rights are indivisible from the right to primary health care. Again, the full exercise of reproductive rights in good human conditions provides an opportunity to refocus health public policies and gives new elements for the difficult ethical choices to be made in establishing the priorities in health policy.

Besides the importance of health and education other social policies should be looked into - housing, urbanisation, transportation, even energy, each in its own way is a decisive factor in the determination of a balanced population dynamics and in the shaping of the quality of life of the population. The years ahead ask for urgent research in firmly establishing these linkages as well as for political vision in not less firmly designing the adequate policies.

Thus, to tackle the question of population is to aim at establishing the clear priorities of social development and at directing the goals of economic growth towards quality of life for all. At the end of the XX century such priorities are led by the pivotal concern of how to put the human person at the center so that quality of life may be attainable by all. The human factor of the equation population-development (and environment) is like no other factor. Human beings can neither be expendable nor disposable in the acknowledged interplay between population, development and environment. They are the subject and ultimate goal of all social processes.

The next UN Conferences are occasions to deepen those convictions and to assert the commitment of all countries to the policies that will guarantee the quality of life of the coming generations.

