

Money for the poor exists; the political will is missing

The International Conference on Development Financing which the UN is holding in Monterey seeks mechanisms to promote world social development, reducing poverty and inequality on our threatened planet.

We are living in an absurdly inequitable world, an explosive barrel, no longer of gunpowder, but one that is nuclear, chemical, ecological and biological. The difference between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% on the planet was eleven times in 1913. It rose to thirty times in 1960, sixty times in 1990 and seventy-four times in 1997. Twenty percent of the world population has 86% of all income and in 1998, 86% of the growth in income also went to the same 20% of the population. These same 20% also possess 74% of the telephone lines and are responsible for 93% of Internet usage. The poorest 20% have 1% of world income, 1.5% of the telephone lines and 1% of the Internet usage.

The combined wealth of the three richest people in the world is equal to the combined GDP of all the lesser developed countries in the world and their 600 million inhabitants. Each day, 30 thousand children under five years old die of malnutrition and totally preventable diseases. (Equal to ten World Trade Centers!) Today, more than 1.2 billion people have to live on less than US\$ 1 per day.

The Earth has existed for approximately 3.5 billion years. Man, as we know him today, has been around for about 50 thousand years, and look at much ruin he has managed to inflict upon our planet! It is so frightening that, if the current rate of environmental degradation is maintained, the human race runs the risk of extinction by the middle of this century due to the effects of global warming. Today, our remaining forests cover only 20% of the Earth, and ten thousand species of plants and animals become extinct each year.

I was in Geneva in 2000, when the UN held a major conference to evaluate the results achieved during the five years following the Copenhagen social conference. More than 100 chiefs of state signed commitments to support the reduction of poverty that were precise, both quantitatively and qualitatively. It was hoped that reports would be issued comparing the commitments and the results achieved, country by country. None of this happened. Data developed by non-governmental organizations showed that very few

www.nossasaopaulo.org.br e www.cidadessustentaveis.org.br

**RE
DE
E** NOSSA
SAOPAU
LO



PROGRAMA
CIDADES
SUSTENTÁVEIS

countries (exactly five) fulfilled their promises, while the majority of the rest showed even weaker performance. For example: it has been established that the richest countries direct 0.70% of their GDP to help poorer countries. The great majority of these countries, which were already below the established standard, reduced the resources devoted to international assistance.

There was no declaration of censure against absent countries. There was no condemnation of those who made solemn promises, took photographs, made eloquent speeches and then did not keep their word. Thousands of people were dispatched, many resources were invested, without any evaluation being done. I found it a grand and saddening piece of theatre.

At the beginning of this year, I was approached by the UN to participate in a preparatory meeting leading to the Monterrey Conference, which is likewise a meeting to evaluate the seven years following the Copenhagen Conference. The overall situation is even worse than that of 2000.

In my talk, I warned that, in the absence of a serious and courageous evaluation, the UN Conferences and the institution itself (so valuable for humanity) would have their credibility seriously threatened. These considerations are valid for all the other conferences: environment, racism, children's rights, women's rights, etc. I asked the following question of the group: "Do sufficient resources exist to end poverty in the world? The answer was: "They exist, and more than enough." Another question: do we know what to do with these resources in order to provide a life with a minimum of dignity to all the inhabitants of the planet?" The answer was: "Yes, we *really* know what we have to do."

There was a rapid arrival at the obvious conclusion that the missing factor is the political will to change priorities and fulfill commitments. Want some examples? In Monterrey, the United States announced that they would increase their development assistance by US\$ 5.5 billion, rising from 0.10% of GDP to 0.12%, well short of the goal of 0.70%. This increase corresponds to a mere 1.25% of their military spending.

The UN amounts that only 0.6% of world GDP would be needed so that the entire poor population could have access to education, health, nutrition and family planning.

The World Bank estimates that only 1% per year of the wealth of the 200 richest people in the world would be sufficient to provide basic education to the entire population of needy children in the world. The World Watch Institute, in Washington, believes that the cost of a six-year program for soil protection, reforestation, reduction of population growth, debt reform for developing countries, increases in energy efficiency and development of renewable energy sources would be US\$750 billion. This is the amount that the world spends on armaments in only one-year!

I am absolutely convinced that, as long as there is not the political will to reverse priorities and honor assumed commitments, we will continue to witness the social and environmental degradation of the planet and the deterioration of the credibility of public institutions. This political will could arise following a massive mobilization and societal pressure, or after serious social and/or environmental crises. Then it might be too late.

Oded Grajew