

European Population Forum 2004: Population Challenges and Policy Responses

Contribution from the floor (13th January 2004, morning session)

Dirk Jarré

International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)

The growing demand for “sustainable development” - with the use of available resources by today’s generations to satisfy their needs in such a way that this does not hamper coming generations to satisfy their own needs – has become a decisive factor in policies. On the other hand we also notice a growing awareness that there is an intrinsic relation between social needs, economic behaviour, environmental concerns and population developments which must be given equal attention and priority to. This leads to the concept where social, economic, environmental and population policies must be considered in an integrated way.

This means that it is indispensable that policies are not, in the first place, hasty and short term responses to the various problems and demands in society but that they must be developed in the framework of long term visions about the desirable future of society and based on shared values and objectives, rights and legal certainty, reliability of responsible action, transparency, and accountability. Without solid ‘social capital’ built on continued positive personal experience with ethical standards, with structures and procedures in society citizens will not give their support to relevant policies over time.

It is perfectly evident that one of the most important aspects of sustainability in development, and this is particularly true for social development, is peoples’ involvement and active participation in the definition, the implementation, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of such policies. This goes beyond the “normal” formal processes of democratic systems mainly based on the majority principle. The main challenge is to put in place the necessary conditions and create an enabling environment in order to allow all people to fully and continuously participate in the process of shaping today’s and future reality of society.

Among these conditions and parameters we certainly need to consider: the State fully guaranteeing peoples’ rights, good governance, transparency of systems and procedures, open access to information, and a permanent structured civil dialogue between public institutions and organized civil society. Clearly this means an enlarged practical understanding of democracy with innovative forms of the organization of democratic, participatory processes.

Sustainability does not only mean rationality and consistency of policies and strategic action over time respecting the needs and the right of self-determination of the next generations with a clear and well founded assessment of the future effects, positive and negative, of today’s decisions and acting. It also implies the understanding that there is a strong structural interdependence between environmental issues, the economic system, the social fabric of society and population developments – meaning that what we do or do not do in one sector may or will have important repercussions in the other sectors. Thus we have important aspects of horizontal and vertical sustainability.

Approaching social policy from this perspective, and finding new ways to co-ordinate political planning and strategic action aiming to shape the future of modern society in this holistic way, is one of the key challenges of our time.

In social policy, aiming at a “healthy” sustainable society, we have to carefully consider aspects of social cohesion, social justice, and solidarity. Social, economic as well as reproductive rights as an integral part of fundamental human rights are one of the key issues to be in the centre of social policies and action – the main problem not being solely their definition and codification, but much more their real implementation and ensuring that all people have in fact access to them and can exercise them.

Solidarity in terms of social responsibility must necessarily be understood at the same time as inter-generational-solidarity and horizontal solidarity between the various groups in society. We have to respect the needs of future generations when using economic resources or piling up financial obligations today and we even have to actively develop the opportunities of chances and possibilities of self-determination of those who come after us. As to solidarity between the various components of society it should be a fundamental and continuous principle that the better off ensure that others who are less well off get the chance to improve their situation – for example in terms of choices of opportunities, care, protection, education, income, work, etc.

Non-governmental solidarity organizations, created by citizens’ initiatives and acting under their independent voluntary responsibility, raise significant values, problems, issues, deficiencies and neglected or uncovered needs in society which are not, not yet or not fully, perceived, recognized and dealt with.

If society wants to be successful in the future in terms of sustainable societal development we need to develop, fast and consequently, an improved political culture of intensive citizens’ participation in all areas of life, covering the conception and shaping of policies, their implementation, their monitoring and their evaluation. This is particularly true for social policy issues. Among the main measures required urgently we see the development of a truly enabling environment for the flourishing and full recognition of non-governmental solidarity organizations as well as the establishment of all the necessary conditions for a continued structured civil dialogue at all levels.