

We need less inequality and a little more fraternity



The world economic crisis hit France's society quite hard. The economy has recovered somewhat, but unemployment and inequality have worsened and society has become more competitive to the detriment of values like fraternity and solidarity. The country also has pressing environmental problems including air and water pollution and a loss of ecosystems. The State has made commitments to pursue sustainable development, and these should now be re-examined not just from the national or European perspective but in terms of their impact in the world. The country's presidential elections are looming and this is an opportunity for civil society organizations to make their voices heard in the debate.

Secours-Catholique / Catholic AID

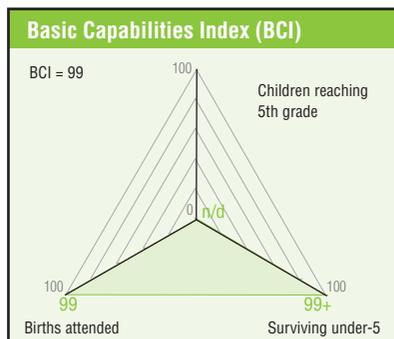
Grégoire Niaudet

France has been seriously hurt by the world economic crisis. Its social protection system has to some extent attenuated the negative effects but unemployment, which is what the French are most concerned about, has increased considerably and now stands at 10% of the economically active population. Public debt has also risen to unhealthy levels as a result of the country's long-running imbalance in foreign trade and the fact that its production is rather uncompetitive. The social consequences are that the most fragile sectors of the population are sliding towards poverty, and inequality is becoming more marked because the richer sectors have been relatively less affected.

In the preamble to the 1946 Constitution, social rights are established as the prerogatives of all citizens. The State's social security apparatus, which has a welfare mechanism and a system to finance it through taxation, was designed to provide uniform benefits for all members of society. At the heart of this redistribution model, the main means of access to rights was work. However, since the 1970s, when large scale unemployment first emerged, the welfare state has been in an ongoing crisis that is not only financial but also to do with its legitimacy and efficiency. The horizontal redistribution system is less effective when an increasing portion of the population is unable to contribute to the social insurance system. People today are uncertain about the future and this is putting more pressure not only on workers as a class but also on individuals. Work is no longer synonymous with well-being. In addition, people are under added pressure and stress because they have to be more productive and efficient, and this is making the world of work very hard, exclusive and demanding.

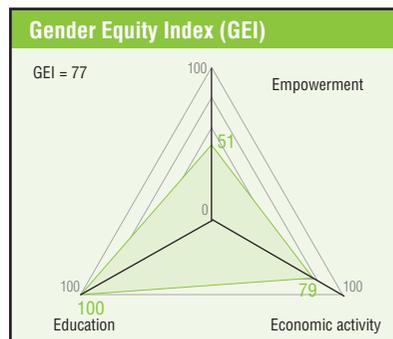
Increasing inequality

There was an economic upturn in 2011 but the benefits of this new growth have gone only to the richer strata of society and inequality is getting worse. A report by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) that came out in April 2011 showed that in the period 2004 to 2007 higher incomes increased more quickly than those of the



population as a whole. For 90% of the people, income increased by a little under 10%, but the 1% of the population whose income is above 84,500 euros (USD 115,798) enjoyed a rise of from 20 to 40%. If wealth is to be redistributed more fairly there will have to be tax reform, and this will have to include taxing capital and reducing or suppressing certain fiscal niches.

The reasons why inequality is increasing in the developed countries are clear: taxation systems have been changed and the burden on the very rich has been lightened, incomes in the world of finance have expanded enormously and production has been reorganized. The current crisis is accentuating these trends because, in order to maintain the financial



sector's prerogatives, States have absorbed most of the costs by making huge loans to the banks. The other side of the coin is that governments in many countries are now implementing austerity policies, and these weigh heavily on the most vulnerable sectors of society and exacerbate inequality.

The solutions that have been put forward such as social development –since 30 years ago– and sustainable development –for the last 15 years– are not sufficiently strong to solve these problems in the current context. The social vision of sustainable development must be based on a series of priorities including reaffirming basic rights, asking just what our needs really are, co-operation on the part of the actors involved, and

ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Some of the most degraded ecosystems in France are the coastal regions. Pollution in general, and that caused by heavy metals and hydrocarbons in particular, has damaged flora and fauna in coastal waters, especially seabirds, molluscs and algae. More than half of France's coastal areas have been urbanized, which makes for an even greater loss of biodiversity, and in fact there are nearly no coasts left that have not been affected by human beings.

Another serious problem that cannot be ignored is the fact that water is becoming increasingly scarce and that its quality is deteriorating. Large scale agriculture consumes some 44% of the water available, and the massive amounts of fertilizer this sector uses is seriously polluting the country's underground water stocks. In the future more plants to produce potable water and more waste-processing facilities will have to be built.

One quarter of France is forest. It is the biggest wooded area in the European Union, but this biosphere is under threat from various kinds of environmental degradation most of which stem from air pollution.

WORLD LEVEL COMMITMENTS

The world has changed completely since the Rio Conference of 1992. Economics and finance have become totally globalized and two parallel trends have emerged, the economic take-off of emerging countries and a crisis in the system that mainly affects industrialised countries and has economic, social, ecological and political aspects. In this context it is becoming increasingly clear that we need a common system for managing the planet so as to defend ourselves against climate change, protect biodiversity and establish more equitable access to natural resources.

- The first priorities are to reduce inequality and eradicate poverty. It is evident that even while countries may achieve economic growth, they have been unable to make good on their commitments to pursue the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Inequality is getting worse and a billion people on the planet are going hungry.
- There will have to be a new system of social protection that benefits all the people in the world. The problem is that industry has to

be competitive but economic globalisation is making for competitive selection between workers in different countries and eroding social protection systems, where such systems exist.

- Another priority is the international fight against the health crisis because chronic illnesses are on the increase everywhere. They are taking the place of the infectious diseases of the last century, a phenomenon known as "epidemiological transition". This crisis is hitting not only society but also countries' economies and it is putting great pressure on health insurance systems, where such systems exist.

Economic globalization in a context of deregulated competition translates into increasing inequality. This takes a variety of forms including competitive selection among farmers in unequal conditions, the economic collapse of regions and States that have lost their industries, income gaps that in most cases are widening between different population sectors, inequality in access to health and

care services, the marginalization of some population groups, and the weakening of social protection systems everywhere. This widespread trend towards the degradation of some social groups raises political and ethical questions, but it also constitutes a considerable burden for countries' economies because they have to provide support to counterbalance inequalities and help people in crisis situations to return to active life, and this is increasingly difficult. Unfortunately the costs of these social ills are indirect, which means they can be passed on to future generations or left for other actors to deal with, but these other actors are the community, and at the end of the day those who bear the burden are the taxpayers.

The notions of sustainable development and social development agree in that they seek a similar balance, they are both concerned with the same social issues and they share common objectives. If we are to make the transition to a better future for all we will have to negotiate a new social contract that involves sharing responsibilities, affirming human rights, and renewing solidarity with others and with future generations.

that everyone should make a contribution so as to enrich local projects and in a broader sense to help renew local public policies.

In the context of the crisis these ideas should be the basis for defining sustainable social development priorities. The way forward has to be to adopt a holistic vision of social, environmental and economic problems, to redistribute wealth and to give everyone a reasonable share. Today's problems in society and democracy should evoke responses built around new collective perspectives and a plan for a shared future that will make sense for every individual. In the sustainable development model each person will have a

role in helping to construct the future and will be provided with the means to develop his or her own talents in a society that has a strong relational dimension.

The worsening of inequality, the degradation of social protection systems, and the individualisation of risks and uncertainty about the future are combining to make everyone into a rugged individualist because there is no clear strategy as to how we can act collectively. The response needed to meet the challenges of climate change is a collective commitment, and this involves completely re-thinking our patterns of consumption and our ways of life so that society as a whole can move towards sustainable development.

France will have presidential elections in the first half of 2012 and it currently occupies the presidency of the G20, and this means civil society organizations have an opportunity to make a contribution to the debate. This is a chance to open up new perspectives, to reformulate the aims and strategies of economic development and social progress, and to change course in society towards a new model geared to seeing social and ecological matters in a different way. Social justice and social cohesion will have to be rebuilt, not as a luxury that we may or may not pursue but as the way to overcome the world crisis. ■