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GLOBALISATION, POVERTY AND INEQUITY

The Colombian government report presented to the Committee of Economic Social and Cultural Rights gives a general overview of the policies defined on a social front, discusses the norms approved on the issue and also includes some background data. The scarce information offered by the official document on the trends and achievements made, change colour when cast in the light of indicators showing the deep ethnic, social and regional imbalances within the country.

During the last decade a Constitutional reform was approved defining Colombia as a Social State of Law and since then several laws and decrees have been made to deal with the social difficulties; however, the issuing of those norms has not really led to improvements in the social situation of the Colombian people. The monitoring of social tendencies is shaky, the information out of date and incomplete, and the levels of effectiveness of the justice system in making the Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCRs) reality is practically non-existent. It is worth pointing out the positive action of tutelage as a mechanism which has served to make advances on the legal provisions for protecting these rights in a few cases.

WEALTH DISTRIBUTION

One of the problems most strongly affecting the social situation of the Colombian people is the unequal distribution of the country's wealth and welfare resources. The income concentration is very high compared to the international averages: «while the poorest two tenths receive only 3.1% of the income, the richest two tenths take 59.9% of the income. The per capita incomes of the

richest ten percent are 46 times greater than those of the poorest ten percent. This relation does not go over six times in countries as varied as Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka». ¹ The social imbalances with figures like these have allowed the CIDES director of the University of the Andes to conclude that; «in terms of wealth distribution we find ourselves considered one of the most inequitable countries in the world.» ²

Monitoring the behaviour of the concentration of wealth according to the GINI coefficient allows us to conclude the tendency towards income concentration deepened between 1988 and 1995, registering 0.53% for this year the highest figure since 1970. ³ A good part of this phenomenon is due to the falling value of the contribution made by salary in the Gross Domestic Product and the broadening of the rift between management and workers' pay.

The concentration of resources is also evident in the financial ambit. In the capital market, the 10 biggest companies take 75% of the market (leading to a concentration of 75%) while in countries like the United States or Japan the degree of concentration is only between 10 and 20%. In terms of share ownership the levels of concentration measured by the GINI coefficient are extremely high ⁴ (0.983 for 1993 from a statistical sample of 358 companies: research data commissioned by the National Superintendency of Securities from the econometrist company SEI).

Land ownership presents one of the highest concentration indices in the world. The statistical data of the last decade show how 56.9% of the holdings covered only 2.8 percent of the productive land, while 0.3% added up to an area equivalent to 60% of the productive area. This phenomenon, rather than easing off, has been compounded by the agrarian counter-reform produced by drug trafficking activity in the nation.

Resource distribution is unequal not only according to a per-

¹ Textual note taken from an article by the Treasurer of the Republic, published in this book «Finances of the Colombian State», pp 4–18

² The index of wealth concentration which serves as a reference for equity fell to standards similar to those of the late seventies (0.48). «Cuadro Coyuntura Social N° 8», pp74

³ Calculations presented by Libardo Sarmiento, on the basis of DNP, based on the survey of homes, «Sintesis 95 Colombia» pp 20.

⁴ The distribution of income during the last decade was regressive, modifying the tendency seen during the seventies and early eighties. Between 1983 and 1991 salaries lost 5.4 percent of their contribution to the national product, improving slightly from 1992, but the internal differentiation deepened between technical workers and better paid managers on the one hand and workers on the other.

son's membership of one social and productive level or another, for in Colombia there are also age-old asymmetries in the access to economic and welfare resources, for geographical, territorial, ethnic and gender related reasons. The gender imbalances were tackled under the sub-heading referring to the rights of women, and those arising from ethnic motives in the new paragraph relating to the right to freedom from discrimination. In this section, we will very briefly refer to the inequitable distribution of resources for the population in rural areas and some impoverished zones compared with the inhabitants of towns in more developed zones. The differences between those who live in the cities and those who live in the country can be seen in the matter of hospital and health provision, in the access to public services, in the salary gap between those who work in one sector or another, and in general in the difference of the levels of poverty which affect the rural and urban people. For instance, some 29% of the rural population have no access to basic health services, while for their urban counterparts this figure is only 19%.

In 81% of poor rural homes – which make up around 80% of all country households – there is no connection to the piped-water network, and 68% suffer overcrowding amongst their other shortcomings. The countryside, which should contribute 50% of all employment only actually offers 35% and the levels of indigence are three times those registered in urban surroundings. The loss of agricultural profitability as a result of the liberalisation and globalisation model adopted in Colombia have led to a general crisis in rural production, which, joined to the reduction of social spending in the sector, has led to the deepening of the breach between the city and the country, with the latter population becoming excluded from the social benefits available to their urban cousins.

One of the direct consequences of the inequitable resource distribution is poverty, a phenomenon which has become the reason why a large number of Colombians cannot enjoy the economic, social and cultural rights they are due, and while the nation registered important advances in tackling the Unmet Basic Needs (UBN) during recent decades, the tendency towards overcoming poverty as measured by UBN decelerated in the last five years as a consequence of cut-backs in social spending. In fact, they remained unchanged and in some cases this deepened the social and regional imbalances in meeting the basic needs of the people. In absolute terms, the number of poor people by UBN standards increased in the metropolitan areas between 1986 and 1992, going from 4.127 to 4.737 million. In departments like Cundinamarca, where the capital of the Republic is found, some 44% of the population have their basic needs unattended to. In the capital

itself, 19% of homes lack one or more basic public services. The distribution of the shortages within the capital is also homogeneous: the neighbourhoods of Bolivar city in the extreme South-east of Bogota have indices of above 50% of basic needs unsatisfied.

Income related poverty, meanwhile, is in a truly critical state. In the last year the regressive tendency seen during the last decade was maintained, with sustained increases in the number and percentage of people below the poverty and of those submerged in abject poverty. The income related poverty stood at nearly 50.8% for 1994, several points above the indicators registered throughout the previous decade. In this decade poverty has been quantitatively concentrated in the urban zones (especially as a result of the urbanisation of the country) and has been determined by the low incomes and an increasingly precarious work market. However, in proportion to the number of residents, the poverty situation is hitting harder in the country, affecting 64% of the population in 1992;⁵ this phenomenon was maintained and became more serious in the following years, as a result of the crisis suffered by the countryside economy during the 1992–1994 period. This led to something which can be identified as a 30% increase in rural poverty, if the previous period of government is studied as a whole.⁶

The sharp end of poverty is seen with the indigence which profoundly affects our society: the average number of Colombians living in poverty is approximately 45%, 37% of these living in the country and small settlements⁷ and 12.45% in the cities. Abject poverty is also a phenomenon concentrated in zones where ethnic minorities settle, like Choco, which registered some 60.2% of its population as UBN in 1993, Magdalena, with 59.2%, Sucre, 64.1%, Cordoba, 59.9% – all of which have a high concentration of Afro-Colombians – and Cauca with 56%, and an especially high indigenous contingent.⁸

The researcher Fabio Giraldo Izasa used the integrated method of measuring poverty⁹ to reach the conclusion that three quarters of the Colombian population are living in impoverished conditions.¹⁰ The average of Colombians living in poverty is approximately 45% and the tendency registered in the recent period tells of a persistent increase in the abject poverty indicators.¹¹

The situation of the poverty of large social groups cannot be attributed to the shortage of resources, given that Colombia is one of the Latin American countries with the highest growth indicators and an economy which has remained relatively stable for long periods of time. The causes of poverty are especially due to the serious social imbalances registered in the country. This phenomenon has persisted during the last decades and has tended to

⁵ «Coyuntura Social» No. 11, pp 139.

⁶ Libardo Sarmiento, «Revista Foro, Debate Electoral 1994», pp 30.

⁷ Data from the National Planning department, Bulletin ... table 2.4.

⁸ Bolletín Sisben del DANE ... table 2.1.

⁹ The data produced by the survey of homes and using a measurement based on the integrated poverty method which joins the concepts of unmet basic needs along with low salaries.

¹⁰ Research by Fabio Giraldo Izasa, director of CINAC, «El Tiempo» 2 October pp 7D.

¹¹ Coyuntura Social No. 10, pp 48.

worsen more recently.

The problems related to the concentration of wealth in a few hands and an unequal enjoyment of the welfare resources is the result of a multiplicity of factors due to the socio-economic structure and social policies of the State. Over the last period, reductions in the amount of the national budget destined for social spending and the regressive tax system imposed by the government can be seen as two of the main culprits. For more than a decade, investment in the social area stood at several points below the 10% of the GDP recommended by the UNDP for countries with a similar level of development. This accumulated deficit is not exactly assumed by the present government, although this has carried out some increases in the percentage of GDP destined to the social sector. On the contrary, the present administration has perpetuated and reinforced the tax collection system which collects money for public funds mainly from indirect or consumption taxes which deepen the poverty of the poorest sectors even further.

THE RIGHT TO WORK

The possibility of making this right effective has become an uncertain expectation for a high number of Colombians due to the generalised insecurity of working conditions, especially amongst young people and women.

Open unemployment has rounded up to 10% during the period, accompanied by an increase in the figures for insecure working relations: the number of informal workers increased to 53% of the workforce, while casual labour and under-employment came to 21% and 13.4% of the EAP respectively. Redundancies due to the modernisation and privatisation of State concerns reached nearly 100,000 and the SAL SP and SALI programmes designed to cushion their consequences failed to take up the slack.

- **Pay:** In the nation as a whole, 20% of workers earn less than the minimum salary and another 50% less than two minimum salaries. This situation is considering the basic family basket of goods costs nearly two and a half minimum salaries. During the course of the decade the buying-power of the average Colombian salary has diminished – particularly for those who receive a minimum salary and the civil servants – thus the breach between the salaries of management and operative or low level employees in the business pyramid has widened. Salaries came to represent 41.6% of GDP at the beginning of the decade and 38.53% in 1995.
- **Industrial Security:** Here, the figures speak for themselves. Some 90% of companies lack even minimal industrial security programmes and nearly half have no hygiene and industrial security regulations. This led to 112,000 accidents in the workplace in 1992.
- **Union rights:** The right to union membership has been more of a formal than real right in the country. Only around 8% of the workforce is in a union, of whom less than a third have the right to collective negotiation, a phenomenon which is a result of the classification of workers as public servants despite

constitutional dispositions on the issue (940,000 workers are State employees).

- State intervention discourages the exercising of the workers' rights to association and strike: The powers by which the State can either authorise or not authorise the operation of the unions led to them rejecting the inscription of 32 union organisations in the union register in 1994, thereby blocking their ability to represent the workers. In the same year, the Employment Ministry declared 32 strike movements illegal under administrative resolutions, which were not preceded by processes where the unions' right to protest was guaranteed. There was no way of appealing against these administrative decisions. Another of the factors which made the right to union membership migratory was the high level of violence against union members. In the last eight years, 1,500 unionists have been murdered, an index which makes Colombia the country with the most murders of union members in the world.

Despite the change in the system, the right to social security in pensions continues to be reserved to those who have a State dependent job or ample resources. However, the new scheme negatively affects the solidarity between generations, between men and women, poor and rich, which operated under the previous system. In the change of pension schemes the acquired rights were only guaranteed to people (women over 35 year old and men over 45) who had already contributed for 15 years. The conditions of age and length of service prior to having the right to a pension were unilaterally changed for all the others.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

The changes in the system for attending health problems which took place this decade have done nothing to remove the main health problems facing Colombians. Epidemics like cholera and dengue fever have reappeared, and illnesses related to under development –like malaria, leprosy, enteritis and diarrhoea– have spread, while other «modern» diseases, like stress, cancer and AIDS have also put in an appearance. The latter has spread fast reaching 10,000 cases this decade.

The primary health problems have not been resolved. More than half of all Colombians have no drinking water supply, 20% suffer from serious undernourishment and environmental and public health difficulties are a widespread problem. In the current plans, no redirection of the health system towards prevention is foreseen.

The changes introduced with the new care system allow for the participation of private capital in the administration and supply of the service. However, this does not resolve the main problems: the physical and technical resources are still insufficient – the number of doctors and nurses per thousand inhabitants corresponds to half those accepted in international standards, and wide swathes of the country have an insufficient quantity of healthcare centres and the care given is of poor quality. The poorer sectors and the rural population are treated by the State hospitals, whose

service is deficient as a result of the permanent crisis in which they find themselves. These circumstances, rather than being resolved, have been worsened, with the new system meaning they are evaluated by the criteria of capitalist profitability by the organism on which their economic resources depend. Furthermore, the problems in the control of funds and policies will not allow for them to achieve better levels in the quality of the services offered.

HOUSING

In Colombia there has never been, nor is there now, an integral housing policy for in depth resolution of the quantitative and qualitative shortage, the problems of monopoly in land ownership nor the difficulties in the loans policy. Some 3.7 million families are in need of housing (a figure which corresponds to a 33% housing deficit in the big cities); the qualitative shortages (overcrowding, cramped space, absence of public services and structural deficiencies) affect 2 million homes which mostly belong to the poorer strata. The housing of these groups suffers from environmental problems in approximately 100% of cases. The solutions suggested by the previous government did not do much to solve this situation: the subsidies paid were markedly insufficient and slow in coming and the housing deficit increased in absolute terms, with the number of homes with qualitative deficiencies making a significant jump.

EDUCATION

Some 9.52% of Colombians lack any education, some 81.56% do not finish primary school, 87.8% do not complete secondary and 97.8% do not end a tertiary course. A good part of these problems are due to a lack of places in the State schools; truancy and the repetition of years are especially common in this type of establishment. Truancy in the first three years runs at 35%; and over both primary and secondary the combined rate is 10%. Both the quality of education and of the teaching staff have fallen noticeably over the last decade.

Under the previous administration the aims for education were not met and the measures adopted did not have a significant impact in the indices of problems in education. This government proposed providing free books for poor students, subsidising the studies of some of them, lengthening the school day and extending primary school coverage. Some of these programmes have begun extremely slowly and a good many of them have still not been backed by policies to make them effective.

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM FROM DISCRIMINATION

This right is especially violated with ethnic communities and women.

In the case of women discrimination occurs in terms of employment, salaries, health and violence. Unemployment levels are double those of men, their salaries are barely 60% those of men, 34% suffer from abuse and 9% are rape victims.

The issue of discrimination shows a marked contrast between what is written in the norms and what really occurs in society. The National Constitution, the laws and the other legislation consecrate the absolute equality of persons in the eyes of the law. However, the social, economic and cultural structure of the nation have produced persistent and serious phenomena of discrimination against people and social groups on a gender, ethnic, social or regional bases.

We do not have complete data on the social situation of the indigenous people, because in some cases these are not processed by the organisms responsible, or because of researchers' difficulties in getting access to the information. Nonetheless, the following figures and cases should provide some idea: 44% of the indigenous population is illiterate (when the national average is 13%); primary school coverage is 11.3% compared with 84% nationally;¹² taken as a whole, the indigenous communities are affected by marked health and housing problems way above national levels. One pathetic case of the health problems which affect these communities is the epidemic of equine encephalitis and dengue fever which attacked more than 10,000 members of the Wayu group causing more than 17 deaths in September to October 1995. The extension and seriousness of this epidemic was partly a consequence of their difficulties in access to drinking water – the Wayu are forced to travel 5 km to collect water, because there is no drinking water supply to where they live in the Guajira desert. The Chimiles (in the department of Magdalena) and the Wiwas in the Sierra Nevada of Santa Maria are equally badly affected by epidemics and hunger. The right to housing and worthy living conditions is also barred to the majority of indigenous communities: the Paeces displaced by the avalanche on the Paez river have been squashed into plastic tents for more than a year due to the slow progress of the programmes to relocate the community.¹³

Nearly all the indigenous people in the nation suffer from the problems of hunger to a lesser or greater degree, or have to live in areas where the civil war makes its victims. On many occasions their right to access to the land – the vital basis for sowing the seeds of their staple foods – is refused them, and they are frequently victims of the violence which forces them to leave the reserves they live in. 150 families of the Zenu group were forced

¹² «El Tiempo», April 2, 1995, pp 1B.

¹³ Denunciation by the ONIC, published in «El Tiempo», June 2, 1995, pp 15A.

to leave Uraba for Cordoba, fleeing from the violence; they had previously been forced to leave Cordoba for Uraba due to an earlier wave of violence.

The situation of the black population is very tough due to the low standards of living. The existing data clearly reveal the situation of ethnic discrimination: the percentage of unsatisfied basic needs in the Afro-Colombian communities stand at 86% –nearly double those registered for the average between whites and mestizos– and the health services barely reach 40% of these communities. Social security only benefits 3% of the black workforce, infant mortality is on a par with the worst standards in the world (more than 110 per 1000 live births), and life expectancy is 54 years, when the national average is 15 years more.

The inequality is also evident in terms of education. Illiteracy affects 35% of the black communities, compared with 14% of the mestizo population. The educational system covers barely 60% of Afro-Colombians at the primary level (more than 30% below the national average), while in secondary the gap widens even further, at 38% coverage (the average for mestizo communities is 88%), and higher education only reaches 1% – one tenth of the national average. Given their access to the education system, the average level of schooling in the black communities is four years of primary school, while the mestizo average is two years of secondary.

The situation is also discriminatory on the housing front, although the data on housing deficits are not available. However, the COMPES document of the west (a report produced by a government organism responsible for planning social spending) recognised that a good many of these suffered from overcrowding and that they were often found in areas of periodic flooding or overcrowding. The aspects which are known are in themselves telling; the coverage of basic public services (water, street lighting, electricity) barely reach 16% of the population compared with the 70% national average.

The situation of the Afro-Colombians who live in the cities is not alluring, according to data from a survey of the black population of Medellin. However, this was revealing data: more than half the population are undocumented, 34.5% are unemployed, 52% of those surveyed work as temporary labourers, 35.7% of those who work are domestic servants and 9% are informal workers. Most of them receive incomes below the minimum salary and only 9% are employers or bosses. 13.3% can neither read nor write, only 43% finished primary school, and a scarce 1.3% have university education.¹⁴

GROUPS FOUND IN A VULNERABLE SITUATION

Violence and exclusion have placed a large number of children, old people, disabled and displaced people in a vulnerable situation. They all suffer from the denial of one or more ESCRs at a higher rate than the national average.

Old people and Children: There are around 400,000 old people destitute, and 15,000 abandoned children living in the streets. Nearly half of the under-15's are abused and a quarter of them, on average, have to work due to their economic, social or family situations.

Forced Displacement: The widespread situation of violence has generated around 600,000 displaced people who receive completely inadequate help from the State. The government does not even promote policies to meet their basic needs, nor deal with their security and social integration problems.

POVERTY AND INEQUITY

These two factors which traditionally affect the social situation in Colombia in a transverse fashion have deepened and spread during the nineties as a consequence of the application of the current economic and social models. Poverty measured by income increased several points, involving half of the Colombian population. Abject poverty affects almost a third of people (a figure which has also shown an increase over the last 5 years).

The State social spending budget has been several points below the 10% of the GDP suggested by the UNDP for similar nations for the last ten years. The last government slightly increased social spending, but real expenditure did not even reach 60% of the planned level. The present administration has offered a larger sum for the social sector, but successive cut backs and inefficiency in the sums actually being paid leads us to predict significant advances will not be made in the situation.

The impoverishment of the Colombian people goes hand in hand with the national income and wealth concentration deepening the inequity which characterises our social situation. The poorest two tenths of Colombians only receive 3.1 percent of the income, while the richest two tenths receive nearly 60%, in a disproportionate distribution six times the average of nations like Switzerland or Sri Lanka. The GINI coefficient, which measures the degree of wealth concentration increased from 0.47% in 1990 to 0.54% in 1995.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The housing, nutrition, education and public services indicators slowed the positive rhythm achieved in previous decades. The new law which regulated health was planned to provide positive development in terms of coverage and equity, but since it was drawn up, it has become clear there are problems in making them effective. These include the intervention of private capital whose efforts to offer and administer health services is not compensated for with efficient control systems. The social sit-

¹⁴ (Survey by the Corporation of Negritudes, Guillermo Cano Isaza, carried out in 1995 an extract of which was printed in «El Tiempo», Apr. 2, 1995, pp 2B.

uation has deteriorated in important aspects such as hidden unemployment, the buying–power of salaries and deepening poverty, the inequitable distribution of the wealth and income. When considered alongside economic growth and stability indicators which register above average figures, these factors show that the non–observation of the ESCRs is not due to prob-

lems with resources but the consequences of serious social inequity.

The new government maintains the guidelines of its predecessor, though destining bigger resources to social expenditure and including human development as part of its economic–social plan, however, as the form in which wealth is distributed is not

HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVES AND ACTION BY THE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The various social movements have participated unequally in the creation and implementation of initiatives to improve the human rights situation in the country. However, overall, the action taken on this issue was less prevalent than in the last decade. The Colombian union movement organised union activities fighting for an effective right to work and union membership for Colombian workers, with something similar to a global battle for economic, social and cultural rights and intermittent participation in various activities and initiatives for human rights and peace in the nation. According to data published by CINEP during the August 7, 1994 – April 1995 period, there were 65 strikes, an increase on the amount registered under the previous government. Only 4.1% of these were held for political reasons or as a reaction to the violation of the right to life, personal integrity or freedom. This last figure means there was a decrease in union mobilisation for reasons unrelated to their direct union conflicts. The longest and most important of the collective stoppages were those carried out by the education and health sector workers. The union movement, particularly the CUT, participated with the government in negotiations which led to the creation of a social pact and generated spaces for agreement on mechanisms allowed workers to exercise the right to join a union. This group presented one particular proposal for the depenalisation of the social struggle – the motion was well received by the government but in practice did not have much effect. Similarly, this confederation participated in mixed groups, working for improvements in civil and political rights with the government and NGOs, and it formed part of the mixed commission created by decree 1533. On the issue of peace, the union movement promoted and participated in the national workshops pushing for a negotiated end to the armed conflict, stressing the possibility of and need for agreements to the protagonists directly involved in the military conflict, in order to benefit the nation and particularly innocent civilians. Finally, working on the same logic, it has actively intervened in seeking solutions to the widespread violence in the Antioquean Uraba.

Meanwhile, rural conflict itself maintained the tendencies registered in the last year of the previous government. In the period running from August 1994 to April 1995, there were 21 rural protest actions, and 2 exoduses. Some 10% of these occurred in response to the violence and the violation of human rights, factors which still reach worryingly high levels in the Colombian countryside. The remaining actions were directly or indirectly linked to the fight for effective economic and social rights for the rural population (2 for public services, 6 for the agrarian policy, 3 for roads and another 3 for regional development). The highlights of the movements in recent months were the coffee growers strikes demanding a guaranteed income for the families of small coffee farmers, and against the fumigation with Glifosato – arguing that it damaged the health and harvests of the rural workers within the fumigated territories.

During the first seven months of the present presidential administration there were 71 civil conflicts. 17 of these were for civil and political rights and a large part of the others were linked to problems with unplanned urban expansion. The most notable were the demonstrations for the right to work of the street vendors, and the public services protests – mostly in poor municipal areas. The indigenous movement has held several demonstrations – although we do not know precisely how many – to recover their land, against violence and for their cultural identity, all of which are their main issues of conflict. The movement of the «negritudes» has called for the revision of the negritude law, as the changes have been at a standstill, meaning several of the basic rights of this community have remained totally unchanged. Cooperativism and the communal movement did not make any claims for the basic rights of their members or for the general violation of human rights. The women's and ecological movements maintained their activity to defend environmental rights and protesting against the building of the Urra 2 dam because of its environmental impact.

being changed and the causes of the impoverishment of large bands of the population are not being modified, it is obvious no significant social advances will be seen. The assistential character of many of the programmes, the regressive tax system and the inconsistency in the employment programmes are more reasons to affirm that in the case of Colombia the popular proverb «entre el dicho y el hecho hay mucho trecho» (there's a big difference between what is said and what is done) certainly rings true.

- Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos Democracia y

Desarrollo

- This document was written in collaboration with ONIC (Movimiento Nacional Indígena), the «Cimarrón» movement, which groups black communities, members of the Workers' Union «CUT», «ENS», the Trade Union National School at Antioquia, and the Gender Group at the Interdisciplinary Work Association ATI. The external audit was done by Libardo Sarmiento, an expert in socio-economic topics.