

Goals for equal human beings

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In the last 50 years environmental protection historically became the fifth basic political goal of modern societies. All societies, since antiquity, looked for security. And from the eighteenth century on, they successively added to this goal four other goals: freedom, well-being or economic development, equality or social justice, and finally environmental protection. In the fight for this fifth goal the world gathers today in Rio de Janeiro, in the great conference sponsored by the United Nations, Rio +20. We already know that we cannot expect too much from this meeting. That it takes place at a difficult moment for all the countries, and particularly for the rich countries that are immersed in the profound crisis they inherited from Capitalism's 30 Neoliberal Years (1979-2008).

But this doesn't mean that there will be no progress. Two accomplishments are well advanced: one, the strengthening of Pnuma (the UN agency that takes care of the environment), and two, the definition of the Sustainable Development Goals. The first case is about improving global governance; the second one is about defining goals for the world and for the countries, as the Millennium Goals had been established.

One may argue that it will not be possible to enforce the fulfillment of these goals, because countries will not be inclined to adopt national compatible goals, and because, even strengthened, Pnuma will not be able to force the countries to adopt them. This is true. We know that the fundamental problem of environmental protection and, particularly, of global warming, is the "hitchhiker" or "free rider" practice. It is everybody's problem, because the avoided damages benefit all, but each one wants to take advantage of other people's effort and minimize its own. But the hitchhiker principle is not the only one that commands both human beings and countries. There are also shared moral values, and spirit of cooperation.

The fact is that the future of mankind – the future of our children and grandchildren – is at risk. And that, by defining goals and improving global governance in the environmental field, besides stating our desire to cooperate, we are saying that we need to regulate the present and plan for the future. That

the alternative of leaving the problem “to the market”, as I still see neoclassical economists and neoliberals say, does not make the least sense. And that even the carbon market makes little sense. It makes more sense, in the short term, to tax polluting companies and activities. And, in the medium term, to develop systems to follow-up and enforce the agreed goals.

But it is important to be reasonable in the definition of the goals, because sustainable development is not only about environmental protection; it is also about growth and reduction in inequality. Sustainable development should be economic, social, and environmental. And we cannot repeat stupid things such as that developing countries cannot reproduce the consumption patterns of the rich countries. Maybe this is not possible, but, if it isn't, it is not up to the poor to give up better standards of living, but to the rich to reduce them. And for that there is only one solution: to start debating environmental goals in per capita terms. There is no argument that justifies different goals for equal human beings.