

Environmental health and sustainable territories

The world environmental crisis has put us in a dilemma which reveals a new fundamental contradiction in the current growth model: on the one hand, its necessity for production on an ever-increasing scale-to sustain and further enrich the hegemonic economic groups in the developed world- on the other, the finiteness of the natural resources necessary to sustain this model.

There are currently unprecedented phenomena in the history of humanity in regard to energy consumption, urbanization, waste disposal, soil contamination, air and water pollution, and climate change and the consequent increase in disease proliferation. What stands out about the globalization of these phenomena is that they do not obey any equanimity in their distribution. Twenty percent of the world's people, almost all of them living in the developed northern hemisphere, consume 80% of raw material and energy produced, while simultaneously being responsible for more than 80% of all pollution. On the other hand, the impact of this pollution has a more significant effect on the people living in the developing southern hemisphere. To point out a few examples from the data regarding this scenario, the United Nations has revealed that in 2009 over one billion people lack access to water and that around 900 million are suffering from malnutrition. Chemical contamination of the soil, mainly due to artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and heavy metals has caused the degradation of more than two billion hectares, but this is having differentiated effects. For instance, the erosion rate of African land is nine times greater than it is in Europe, and this further aggravates hunger in Africa, which is the only continent to have experienced a decline in agricultural production since the 1980s.

One of the main questions to be pondered, that is central to this civilization crisis, is the unsustainable nature of development policies. A scenario of uncertainty accompanies them, as they have negative impact on the vulnerable populations in their countries, whose health and life quality are reduced. The answers to these questions, on the other hand, are fragmented and subordinate to a verticalized and centralized planning model which totally lacks, or has low participation, of interested social networks, thus compromising its democracy, one of the fundamental pillars of sustainability and social development.

Encountering new paths to sustainable human development requires reconciliation between man and nature and a new social pact that should be backed up by a profound rethinking of current production and consumption patterns, a process of changes which it is hoped societies, governments, companies, and academic institutions will take responsibility for.

The workgroup Health and Environment of Abrasco has been reflecting about the environmental crisis and its repercussion on public health and offers, in this issue of *Ciência e Saúde Coletiva* articles produced by its collaborators to contribute with this debate that for us in Brazil has a special importance, since it is in course the 1st National Conference on Health and Environment, which national edition will happen in December 2009, and has as main challenge the definition of guidelines for a integrated public policy at the environmental health field.

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