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In recent decades there has been a significant improvement in the human lot world-wide, with substantial progress in many dimensions of human existence (1). In the political and institutional realm there has been an impressive increase in pluralistic and democratic regimes, particularly after 1989 when communism fell in Central and Eastern Europe. Demilitarization continues, there is a decreasing number of armed conflicts and a fall in military expenditures as well. The strength of civil society is growing and civil accountability is more pronounced. Institutional development no longer brings more power only to the state but also to other public institutions, the private sector and NGOs.

Dramatic improvements have been recorded in the most important aspects of human development. Average life expectancy increased during the past thirty years by more than a third. At least 120 countries with a total population of more than 5 billion have a life expectancy at birth of more than 60 years, the global average is 66 years (compared to 48 years in 1955), and further growth is projected. Infant mortality in developing countries decreased from more than 149 per one thousand live births in the late fifties to 64 now - less than half the original figure. This is the result of improvements in health care, increasing access to safe water, better sanitation and other factors. Over the same period, the proportion of the population in developing countries suffering from chronic malnutrition fell from about 40% to 20%. Adult illiteracy has been reduced by almost half, whilst enrolment at primary school level increased by nearly two thirds. The status of women in society improved considerably and their role has been strengthened.

These successes have been accompanied by enormous economic progress. Even the least developed countries experienced an improvement in their economic performance. During the last 50 years poverty has fallen more than in the previous 500 years. For the first time in human history the hope of eradicating poverty seems attainable. These positive changes occurred despite a dramatic increase in world population.

Of course this positive overall development has its dark sides too. The difference in life expectancy between the richest nations and the poorest is still more than 45 years, and similarly dramatic differences exist in indicators of malnutrition, illiteracy, gender equity and many other areas. The world has become more economically polarized both between and within countries. The gap between per capita income of developed and developing countries more than tripled during the past three decades. While the assets of world's 300 or so billionaires exceed the combined annual incomes of countries with almost half of world population, about 3 billion people live on less than USD 2 per day. Despite these and many other grave deficiencies the improvement of the individual and social life of humans on our planet Earth is indisputable. Many more people live longer, fuller and more dignified lives now than at any other time in all of human history.

One of the fundamental ecological - and indeed also economic - laws stresses that any asset can be acquired only at a price, i.e. that there is indeed no such thing as a 'free lunch'. And neither is our magnificent contemporary feast without price. The problem is that this price is not paid by we who enjoy the feast. It is paid by somebody else. It is paid by nature, by the global geobiosphere that provides us with all the essential services (2) we need for our rich banquet. We humans are not paying; we do not need to, we are the masters. The entire planet Earth is under our domination (3) and must provide us with its services, willy-nilly.

And our domination leaves heavy footprints on the whole planet. Human civilization since its dawn some sixty to forty thousand years ago has always changed the face of the Earth, and deep ecological changes occurred wherever human occupation lasted. However, until very recently natural forces were always dominant. A fundamental change took place in the last three decades, the very decades of the spectacular human gains referred to above: human activity became more powerful than all the forces of nature. Let us consider a few examples.

The magnitude of the flow of materials undergoing the global sedimentary cycle (of rock weathering, erosion, transport, forming of sediments and rock-forming processes) is about 10 billion t/yr, while anthropogenic flows (caused by agriculture, mining, building and construction, industrial production, the generation of wastes and their disposal) are at least ten times larger. Some of these anthropogenic flows are very dangerous, such as the erosion of topsoil (which amounts to 30-40 billion t/yr) or man-made additions to the biogeochemical cycles of carbon, nitrogen and other biogenic as well as toxic elements. Natural flows of copper, silver, lead, mercury and other heavy metals are only tiny fractions - one hundredth to less than one thousandth - of their technogenic flows.

The surface of the Earth has also been altered substantially. 10-15% of total land area is occupied by agricultural fields or urban structures, whilst another 6-8% is occupied by intensive pastureland. The overall proportion of transformed or degraded land area is 40-50%, while the rest is dangerously fragmented. The vast expanses of the oceans, until recently thought to be essentially unaltered, are more and more experiencing decisive human impacts too. More than 60% of the world's fisheries are on the brink of overexploitation or already depleted by overfishing. Coastal zones both at sea and on land have also been substantially altered: for instance, about 50% of the mangrove ecosystems globally have been fully or partly destroyed.

Most worrisome of all is the loss of biodiversity. Here we are confronted with the bleakest picture of the consequences of the human domination that is causing the extinction of faunal and floral species and reducing biodiversity at all other levels, whether one considers landscape, ecosystem or gene pool. According to recent data rates of species extinction are now of the order of 100 to 1000 times those before contemporary human impact. This is illustrated by data on the best known species of animals and plants. About 25% of bird species have been driven to extinction, whilst 18% of mammals, 5% of fish and 8% of plants are considered to be highly endangered.

However, humanity at large seems quite happy with its dominant position on the Earth and willing to continue this apparently free luxurious feasting for ever. This is simply not possible. Disregard for the ever graver consequences of human domination cannot be sustained ad infinitum. The carrying capacity of the planet is limited, even if we are not able to pinpoint these limits with any accuracy. The ruthless drive for progress, disregarding the true situation will inevitably come to an end. This end might or might not be a catastrophic one. I am deeply convinced that the catastrophe is not inevitable, but a lot of an extremely hard work by many people is needed to avert it. The Earth Charter Campaign is an extremely important and necessary part of this work.

In my opinion, the Earth Charter should remind the people of domination and complacency of three very important things they seem to be more than happy to forget.

One. We humans have not ceased to be part of nature. By contrast, in our domination of the planet we have drawn nature into our human world. Our rules are governing the planet's processes in a decisive way. Our actions are more important than the forces of nature. The planet is still a natural phenomenon but at the same time has become a world (4), a human world, of which nature is just a part. We are therefore obliged to treat the non-human part of the world by the same measures as we treat ourselves, to apply principles of culture, tolerance, respect for the individual and his or her specific rights, acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of every being. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that governs our behavior towards our own kin may serve as a model for our behavior towards all non-human beings on Earth.

Two. Any role of domination is not a one-sided relationship; it has two sides just as every coin has. The other side is responsibility. Every master is by definition responsible for his subjects, and he or she may be either a good or a bad master. Like it or not, we humans are the masters of the planet Earth. Let us be good masters and let the Earth Charter spell out our commitments. We Christians are in this respect guided by the Holy Scriptures and the recent reminders by the Holy Pope (5). Humans in this tradition are seen as God's co-workers in His task of creation, their power has its anchor in the power of God, and humans must be responsible stewards of creation and not irresponsible tyrants trying to usurp the place of God.

Three. The life-supporting systems of the Earth are already stressed and the carrying capacity of some of them is very nearly if not already exceeded. The world community appreciates individual aspects of this dangerous situation with different degrees of urgency. Sometimes the measures taken seem to be adequate (e.g. the Montreal Protocol and its amendments), sometimes at least the first steps have been taken (e.g. the Kyoto Protocol), and sometimes action of any sort is sorely lacking (e.g. the Biodiversity Convention, which entails no binding commitments so far). What is still almost completely absent is the notion of the endangered whole, a holistic approach to planetary systems. The Earth Charter should focus on this, not dissipating its force by addressing fragmented, detailed issues. It should concentrate instead on formulating the most important general principles.

During the preparation of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development I served as a Chairman of Working Group 3, which was entrusted with the noble task of putting together the draft of the Earth Charter to be adopted in Rio. It is well known that we failed. Eventually The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development was adopted. It is a valuable document and indeed an important step forward but it is definitely not an Earth Charter. There are perhaps different reasons why we failed (including my own less than perfect chairmanship) but if I may simplify I would say - now, almost a decade after those sometimes bitter negotiations - that at Rio the time was not ripe for a true Earth Charter.

Fortunately, the situation may be different today. Public attitudes towards sustainability and the environmental dimension of development have changed substantially in the direction of more appreciation of their crucial importance. The awareness of the looming ecological predicament of the planet is much more widespread. This is of course enhanced by the dramatic deterioration of several of the Earth's systems, which is directly experienced - often with fatal effects - by more and more of the world's peoples. This is certainly a menacing state of affairs. Hopefully attitudes are more mature today and the world community will prove itself willing to adopt an Earth Charter that expresses the determination of the peoples of the world to recognize a new planetary citizenship, embracing not only humans but also responsibility for all the Earth's creation.

References

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