

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION

LOGA RALUCA GABRIELA

Doctoral candidate, University of Craiova

1. The two facets of the demographic factor

Throughout history, mankind has had to face a series of dramatic events and processes: various crises, wars, calamities and natural catastrophes, the disappearance of entire civilizations, exoduses and so on. However, its great problems, as Thierry P. Milleman¹ argues, are just starting.

The first issue he discusses is that of the geographic space in today's conditions. More precisely, he talks about the idea of a major deficit of physical space in the case of populations located in the southern hemisphere (most of them pertaining to the developing world) and an excess of physical space for the populations located in the northern hemisphere (largely pertaining to the developed world). It thus becomes apparent that the demographic factor manifests two opposite trends: one characterizing the underdeveloped areas, where population increases exponentially, and the other characterizing modern areas, where the population is decreasing. These two hypostases paint two opposite pictures: The North and the South. The North, characterized by an accentuated crisis of the demographic factor, generated by the decrease in birthrate with severe consequences on the human capital, social development and the traditional family, causing population ageing, an imbalance between generations etc. Thus, a crisis characterized by *depopulation*.

On the other hand, the South, much like the Earth's poles, is the absolute opposite, with a chaotic evolution of its population and an exponential increase in natality. Here, the crisis indicates not a deficiency but an excess which can no longer be managed or held under control, regardless of the prohibitive measures applied. Every study on the overall evolution of the population highlights *the overpopulation* of the developing world, a phenomenon akin to a delay-action bomb². At the start of the 3rd millennium, the population of the world counted six billion people; in only eleven years this number increased by one billion, and in less than 50 years, a sustained growth pace will put us at 12 billion people in the world³.

At the same time, the resources we need in order to sustain life are diminishing. The demographic evolution in the South is controlled by the mathematic law of exponential growth, and equally exponential are its consequences: the destruction of the economy, culture, society and environment as we know it are irreversible.

Th. P. Milleman's comment puts things into perspective: "For this reason, if we were to imagine that the earth can support and feed the entire world, we will need less than fifty years for

¹ Thierry P. Milleman, *Fața ascunsă a lumii occidentale*, Pro Editură și Tipografie, Bucharest, 2008, p. 22.

² See Adrian Gorun, *Dezvoltarea socială și globalizarea*, „Academica Brâncuși”, Târgu-Jiu, 2012, pp. 50-51.

³ Source: The UN World Population Prospects - 2002-2003.

humanity to double in population again. Then, world population will count 24 billion people. Then it will double again in less than forty years. And so on.”¹

Therefore, the population in the North keeps decreasing, the population in the South is increasing exponentially and, by natural compensation, paradoxically, the overall population will continue to grow.

2. The demographic factor, the decrease in resources and migration

In the past few years, the term “sustainable development” has made its way into scientific lingo as well as into common language, describing a type of development which *conditions* and *limits actual access* to resources without jeopardizing the access of future generations thereto. However no government authority has attempted to approach this problem beyond the 2050 horizon. “There is a quasi-general consensus on keeping quiet, although, from a mathematic standpoint, the exponential growth from 12 to 24, 48, 96, 192 million people will be reached before the end of the 21st century.”²

The demographic problem affects everyone today - it is a global issue - however the intensity thereof varies greatly over large geopolitical areas. As stated above, the evolution of the demographic factor is not the same for poor countries as it is for developed ones: “Most poor countries have already seen their population more than double during the past fifty years, and it will double again during the next thirty years (...) It would be much more honest to talk about the catastrophic problems anticipated to be faced by populations in poor countries during the following years. As a consequence of this demographic explosion, many countries have witnessed their economy transition from self-sufficiency to poverty. Other countries, temporarily in a better position due to the exploitation of their own raw materials, are already on their way to poverty due to the demographic boom, on one hand, and the stagnation of their economic and *social* development, on the other, caused most times by the plundering of the country through the export of local riches³.”

The current world is confronted with a new split, this time in demographics⁴ (chronic overpopulation of areas inhabited by poor peoples and chronic underpopulation of certain western countries). “This underpopulation – concludes Adrian Gorun – facilitates the clearing of territories in developed countries due to a drastic decrease in the density of the original population, opening the door to massive migrations. Except that rich states are subjected, in these conditions, to a set of major constraints: alteration of identities, a clash of civilizations, a rejection of immigrants coming from their own peoples, potential threat of unemployment for native populations due to the massive competition represented by cheap labor coming from immigration, a decrease in the pace of development, even poverty import⁵.”

UN estimates carried out more than seven years prior were that Europe would receive in the following ten years over 28 million immigrants coming from the geographic areas under its influence, mostly Muslim. Although estimates were somewhat unsettling, what follows by far exceeds expectations. Moreover, compared to approximately 3 billion people to be born in countries which have become sterile due to the overexploitation of raw materials, destruction of

¹ Thierry P. Milleman, op. cit., p. 18.

² Adrian Gorun, op. cit., p. 51.

³ Thierry P. Milleman, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴ Adrian Gorun, op. cit., p. 51.

⁵ Adrian Gorun, op. cit., pp. 51-52.

traditional agriculture and the lack of economic alternatives, 28 million is actually an insignificant sample. The ever-expanding disaster affecting peoples in the developing countries is unimaginable. WHO statistics show us that 1.5 billion people do not have access to water, over 2 billion do not have sewage, over 18 people die annually from infectious diseases and over 20% of the world population is illiterate. The malnutrition affecting one billion people, the lack of housing, pollution, and short life expectancy are realities that contribute to this desolate state of things.

One enlightening conclusion: “The only solution for these populations will be death, war for resources or immigration to developed countries.¹” Does immigration solve the issue of the demographic boom? Or rather globalizes poverty?

3. *The impact of the demographic crisis on education*

In the era of globalization, education is facing an increasing number of problems - school has lost its monopoly over basic education, while education itself has lost its identity in a consecrated social and cultural arena. In this context, the question “*How does the demographic crisis affect education?*” is and remains a legitimate question.

As we discussed earlier, the demographic crisis is a complex phenomenon, manifested by two processes which, although opposite, interact: overpopulation (intertwined with poverty) and underpopulation. As both these processes are sides of the same phenomenon, it is natural for their effects to intersect.

Returning to our question, we must say that we cannot give a clear answer unless we take into account a few criteria which help define the stakes of education in a community or in society. These criteria are: a) access to education; b) the way in which education covers its end goals and exercises its role; c) validation of the contents of the education by the community/society.

A few statements with regard to these criteria:

a) Access to education is one of the criteria used to quantify the prevalence of education in the Human Development Index (HDI) and is comprised of two dimensions: *inclusion* and *exclusion*. Both dimensions are applicable to each schooling cycle and vary according to the two processes of the demographic crisis. Thus, overpopulation in conjunction with poverty generates illiteracy, school dropout, the failure of social integration etc. Inclusion is situated below the level of the population of school age and decreases from lower segments to higher ones. Therefore, exclusion parameters increase, especially considering that poverty - almost generalized - decreases the chances of access to education. However, things are much more complicated as there are many factors at play in the relationship between the demographic crisis and education; not just material, but also subjective: individual, particular or general. Also, this relationship must be regarded in its evolution, and not statically (one of these evolving factors being public interest in education).

The logical solution would be for underpopulation to increase chances to education, since inclusion is assessed by comparison to a lower (and ever decreasing) number of children of school age, and exclusions to diminish. But things are far from that, and sometimes even at the opposite end of the spectrum. Studies reveal that the effects of the demographic crisis on education are largely the same, albeit different in scope and intensity. That is because when

¹ Thierry P. Milleman, op. cit., p. 22.

assessing access to education we must take into consideration another indicator: the level of social capital (and, inevitably, educational capital) within the community or society in charge with individual training. Especially since, in the current conditions of massive globalization and migrations, once the demographic deficit in various states has been covered (such as the case of France, Germany, northern countries), the elements that define educational culture are also “transferred,” which makes integration into and through school if not impossible, then at least difficult. Contamination is equally “fertile” both positively and negatively, facilitating the rise of phenomena specific to moral ambivalence. Therefore, in this context, differentiations are difficult to intercept and analyze, while generalizations become inadequate. This is why a unidirectional relation between overpopulation and access to education or between underpopulation and access to education cannot be established: the equation is further complicated by factors which increase or decrease the probability of exclusion.

b) The goal of education is individual training by means of social integration and cultural awareness, which is accomplished by the standards imposed. The demographic crisis generates an involutory shock in quality by means of both its processes: overpopulation leads to educational policies aiming to sustain access to compulsory essential education and reduce exclusion factors, which affect quality by lowering minimal standards, while underpopulation leads to a drastic decrease in the number of students, which leads to policies aiming to increase inclusion and decrease exclusion (minimal standards are constantly lowered in order to make school more accessible and appealing; the demand for labor remains uncovered since the supply is very low).

c) The content of the education must correspond to the imperatives put forward by the community or society at large. Societies which invest in education make profitable long-term investments, turning education into a vector of sustainable development. On the contrary, societies that neglect education and classify it as an “unproductive” sector are condemned to backwardness. The demographic crisis impacts the validation of educational content, as both overpopulation and underpopulation alter the premises of the educational pursuit. This impact is most evident with regard to its identity.

Bibliography

Adrian Gorun, *Dezvoltarea socială și globalizarea*, “Academica Brâncuși” Publishing, Târgu-Jiu, 2012.

Thierry P. Milleman, *Fața ascunsă a lumii occidentale*, Pro Editură și Tipografie, Bucharest, 2008.