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What is at Stake in Copenhagen

In Copenhagen the 192 peoples representatives are going to face an irreversibility: the Earth has already warmed up, largely as a result of our way of producing, consuming, and treating nature. We can only adapt to the changes and mitigate their perverse effects.

Humanity might normally be expected to ask itself, like a doctor to his or her patient: why have we reached this situation? The symptoms should be considered and the cause identified. It would be a mistake to deal with the symptoms while leaving the cause untouched and continuing to jeopardize the patient's health.

That is exactly what seems to be happening in Copenhagen. Means are being sought for treating the symptoms but they do not get at the fundamental cause. Climate change with extreme events is a symptom produced by greenhouse gasses which has human fingerprints. The suggested solutions are: reduce the percentage of gasses, higher for industrialized and lower for developing countries; create funds to assist poor countries and transfer technologies to the more backward. All this in the context of endless discussions that impede minimum consensus.

These measures attack only the symptoms. The effort must go deeper, to the causes that produce those gasses which are harmful to the health of all living things, and the Earth itself. Copenhagen could provide the occasion for courageously drawing up a balance sheet of our practices in relation to nature, humbly recognizing our responsibility, and wisely prescribing the right remedy. But this is not what is anticipated. The prevailing strategy is prescribing aspirin for someone who has a very serious heart disease rather than doing a transplant.

The Earth Charter is right when it says, "As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. . . . This requires a change of mind and heart. "There it is: patches are not enough; we must start over, that is, find a different way of inhabiting the Earth, of producing and consuming with a cooperative mindset and a compassionate heart.

From the start it must be recognized: the problem in itself is not the Earth, but our relationship to it. It lived for over four billion years without us and it can continue tranquilly without us. We cannot live without the Earth, without its resources and services. We have to change. The alternative to change is accepting the risk of our own destruction and a horrible devastation of biodiversity.

What is the cause? It is the dream of pursuing the happiness that is attained by piling up material wealth and by endless progress, using for that purpose science and technology with which all the Earth's resources can be exploited without limit. This happiness is sought individually, by entering into competition with one another, thereby fueling selfishness, ambition, and lack of solidarity.

In this competition the weak are victims of what Darwin calls natural selection. Only those who adapt best deserve to survive; the rest are, naturally, selected and condemned to disappear.

This illusory dream has prevailed for centuries, making a few rich and many poor, at the expense of a frightful devastation of nature.

Rarely has the question been raised: can a finite Earth support an infinite project? The answer is being given to us by Earth itself. It is unable by itself to replace what has been extracted from it; it has lost its internal equilibrium as a result of the chaos that we create in its physico-chemical base and by the pollution of the atmosphere that makes it change in condition. If we continue on this path we will undermine our future.

What could be expected from Copenhagen? Just this plain confession: we cannot continue as we are now. It is a simple proposal: We are going to change direction. Instead of competition, cooperation. Instead of endless progress, harmony with the rhythms of the Earth. Instead of individualism, generational solidarity. Utopia? Yes, but a utopia that is necessary in order to assure a future.

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