

Rights and human security to break the vicious circle



Neo-liberal economic policies generate multiple vicious circles of human insecurity. One of these circles (involving indiscriminate trade liberalisation, the crisis in rural areas and migration) illustrates the extent to which economic, social, cultural and environmental rights are being violated. In December 2003, following recommendations made in the Diagnosis of the Human Rights Situation in Mexico, President Vicente Fox made a commitment to set up a National Human Rights Programme. It is essential that the State addresses the question of rights by taking a holistic approach that recognises their interdependence, in order to start creating “virtuous” circles of human security.

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The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the aspiration to a world in which people can “live free of fear and poverty” but the fact that these rights are ignored and scorned has been a great obstacle on the road to this ideal. Article 25 of the Declaration consecrates economic, social and cultural human rights framed in the right to an adequate standard of living. This report analyses certain dimensions of social and economic life in Mexico in which the human right to an adequate standard of living is systematically violated, posing a threat to human security.

The Commission on Human Security has established that what is “needed are integrated policies that focus on people’s survival, livelihood and dignity...”² The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has sounded warnings about economic (poverty, lack of housing) and food (hunger) threats to human security. Bearing in mind these perspectives, we analyse the following issues, which together constitute a vicious circle of human insecurity in Mexico: a) structural obstacles to the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living, b) rural and urban poverty, c) free trade and the crisis in the countryside, and d) the phenomenon of migration.

Structural obstacles

The civil and social organisations that have been monitoring and evaluating the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) implemented in Mexico over the last 20 years have documented and publicly denounced their economic, social, cultural and environmental impact, and demanded that the federal executive and

legislative powers end this process of deterioration in people’s standards of living, which we consider to be a systematic violation of human rights and therefore an attack on the human security of millions of people in our country.³ Some of these observations were taken up in the Diagnosis of the Human Rights Situation in Mexico, carried out by the representation in Mexico of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) in the framework of a technical co-operation agreement with the Mexican Government.

The Diagnosis includes a section on the structural obstacles to guaranteeing the right to an adequate standard of living in Mexico, some of which are summarised below:⁴

- The economic liberalisation model that since 1985 has opened up the economy to foreign trade and promoted foreign investment has not achieved its goal of reactivating sustained economic growth in the country, and its implementation has been socially irresponsible.
- A sustained dismantling of institutions which supported the production and consumption of grains and oilseed produced by small peasant farmers, and the massive influx of imports of such products has created a dangerous level of food dependency and exacerbated rural poverty.
- Although a big effort has been made to increase resources to programmes to combat rural poverty at the level of individuals, the design and implementation of these programmes do not take the human rights perspective into account, and in their application and coverage they have generated exclusion and discrimination.
- The conditions that have been accepted in agreements and conventions with international financial institutions and in free trade agreements and treaties have restricted the Government’s margin of autonomous action with respect to defining economic and social

policy, and consequently social policies and programmes are subordinated to free market economic agreements.

- Over the last 20 years the main elements of Mexico’s economic policy have included a dismantling of the State, the privatisation of public enterprises, market opening, control of inflation, balanced budgets, insufficient and volatile availability of credit, unfair competition against Mexican producers, an elimination of subsidies, salary controls and the deregulation of markets, all of which has wrought changes in the national production system. This has had serious repercussions for the standards of living and the economic, social and cultural rights of individuals and families.

Rural and urban poverty

SAPs have also generated social and economic insecurity, which in rural areas means that the population is pushed deeper into poverty.

The Secretariat for Social Development (SEDESOL) estimates that 53.7% of the population - around 53 million people - earn a daily income of MXN 28.1 (USD 2.6) per person in rural areas, and MXN 41.8 (USD 3.8) in urban areas, which is not enough to pay for basic necessities including food, education, health, clothing, footwear, housing and public transport. Of the total rural population, 69.3% are in this situation, while in urban areas the figure is 43.8%.⁵ At the present time three quarters of the population (about 75 million people) are concentrated in urban areas, and a quarter (around 25 million) live in rural areas. This means that about 18 million are living in extreme poverty in the countryside and around 33 million in the cities.⁶

This gap between urban and rural areas is wider if we analyse the situation of the female population from infancy through to old age. According to the

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2 Commission on Human Security. *Human Security Now*. New York, 2003, p. 1V.

3 For further information cf. “Informes del Ejercicio de Evaluación Ciudadana del Ajuste Estructural”. CASA-SAPRIN. www.equipopueblo.org.mx

4 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR). *Diagnóstico sobre la Situación de los Derechos Humanos en México*. Mundi-Prensa, 2003, pp. 73-74.

5 Secretaría de Desarrollo Social and Comité Técnico para la Medición de la Pobreza. *Estudio sobre evolución y características de la pobreza en México en la última década del siglo XX*. August 2002, p. 31. www.sedesol.gob.mx

6 Estimates are based on rural-urban population evolution data from the National Population Council and the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Computing. Executive Power, *Segundo Informe de Gobierno*, 2002.

UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the proportion of rural women living in extreme poverty has risen to 52%.⁷ Although few statistics disaggregated by sex are available, gender inequality in poverty is a reality. An example of this is the so-called triple or even quadruple working day that many women (including children and senior citizens) have to face in order to meet different needs, which range from feeding the family to caring for people who are ill, old, or have special needs, and who have no chance of accessing public services.

Free trade and the crisis in the countryside⁸

Mexico has subscribed to 11 Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with 32 countries on three continents, and 19 Agreements for the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investment. In these, "national interests take second place to unregulated private transnational interests".⁹ The archetype of all the treaties is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994) which 10 years ago was presented as the way to transform Mexico into a great exporting nation, reduce poverty, increase employment and achieve macro-economic stability. However, none of these "benefits" has materialised, since although Mexico has a trade surplus with the United States, these exports mainly come from *maquiladoras*,¹⁰ the automobile industry and oil production, and are classified as "exports of cheap labour and natural resources. Besides this, exports are concentrated in a few activities and are dominated by a very small group of transnational corporations."¹¹

Turning to the rural sector, the World Bank itself has recognised that the "benefits" from NAFTA have not reached rural areas, and that the southern states have not gained from the treaty. On the contrary, a quarter of the 28 million people living in the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas live in extreme poverty, and inequality is increasing. Although

the World Bank claims that this is partly because these regions were not prepared for economic opening, it also recognises that the share of social expenditure that the Mexican Government assigns to these regions is relatively low compared with their level of economic development, and that the fiscal situation could allow for an increase in spending.¹²

Since NAFTA came into force, agricultural imports into Mexico have increased, and with this the country's food sovereignty and security are being undermined. For millions of people this represents a huge obstacle to human security. The main direct impact has been on thousands of producers in the countryside. Some of the most significant data on this point are as follows:¹³

- NAFTA has meant an increase in agro-food imports. In 1995, imports of these products from the United States amounted to USD 3,254 million and exports were worth USD 3,835 million. By 2001 imports had jumped to USD 7,415 million and exports had gone up to USD 5,267 million. In 1995, Mexico had an agro-food trade surplus of USD 581 million with the United States, but now it has an annual deficit of USD 2,148 million.
- In 1990, Mexico imported 8.7 million tons of the ten basic crops (maize, kidney beans, wheat, sorghum, rice, etc.), but by 2000 this had soared to 18.5 million tons, an increase of 112%. Before NAFTA, the maximum import of grain in a single year had been 2.5 million tons, but in 2001 imports were 6.15 million tons.
- One consequence of unfair competition from foreign imports is that the real commercial value of national products has collapsed. Between 1985 and 1999, maize lost 64% of its value and kidney beans lost 46%, although in no way did this mean lower food prices for consumers: between 1994 and 2002 the price of the basic goods' basket increased by 257%.
- Poverty is driving the rural population to migrate to the cities and to the United States. According to SEDESOL, an average of 600 rural dwellers leave their lands each day. The countryside has lost 1.78 million jobs since NAFTA came into force.

- In the United States, subsidies from the Government to producers are worth an average of USD 21,000 per producer, but in Mexico the corresponding figure is USD 700. After the North American Agricultural Law becomes effective, subsidies to agricultural producers in the United States will increase by 80% over the next 10 years.

In November 2002, in the context of imminent tariff reductions for the majority of agro-food imports in line with NAFTA provisions, 12 regional and national peasant organisations initiated a movement called *El Campo No Aguanta Más* (The Countryside Can Take No More). Their basic demands are: renegotiation of the agricultural clauses in NAFTA; implementation of a structural land reform programme and mid- and long-term planning by a State commission; a sizeable and sustained increase in the rural development budget with the requirement that it be multi-annual; a system of rural financing designed to meet the needs of small and medium-sized producers; wholesome food that is nationally produced in sufficient quantities to meet the needs of all Mexicans; full implementation of the San Andrés agreements with respect to the rights and culture of indigenous peoples; a sustained initiative to overcome the social and legal marginalisation of the agricultural sector; and a revision of the agrarian legal framework.¹⁴

Migration: economic self-exile

In this context of poverty and the disintegration of the production structures in the countryside, it comes as no surprise that there is massive migration to the cities and large-scale emigration to the United States. The exodus is mainly from states in the south and west, the regions of the country with the lowest levels of human development.¹⁵

TABLE 1

Migrants' remittances		
	2002	2003
Mexican population in the USA	9.5 million	9.9 million
Total remittances	USD 8,953 million	USD 14,500 million

Source: National Institute of Migration. www.inami.gob.mx

7 Comunicación e Información de la Mujer, AC, Periodismo con Perspectiva de Género. "52% of rural women in Mexico live in extreme poverty, the majority without access to education". Mexico, DF, 7 February, 2003. www.cimacnoticias.com

8 This section is based on Castañeda, Norma. *Pobreza y libre mercado en México*. DECA Equipo Pueblo, AC, mimeo, December 2003. nacastaneda@equipopueblo.org.mx

9 Witker, Jorge and Laura Hernández. *Régimen jurídico del Comercio Exterior de México*. Chapter 1: "Introducción al Comercio Internacional". UNAM, p. 14.

10 This is the Spanish word for the plants of a foreign or transnational company which are set up in a country where labour is cheaper to make or assemble some components of a determinate product.

11 Nadal, Alejandro, Francisco Aguayo and Marcos Chávez. *Siete mitos sobre el TLCAN*. December 2003. www.americaspolicy.org/articles/2003/sp_0312mitos.html

12 World Bank. *Estrategia de Desarrollo de los Estados del Sur*, Vol 1. www.bancomundial.org.mx

13 Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria, AC. "Datos sobre la situación del campo en México. Algunos resultados del Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN) en agricultura y alimentación" in www.ciepac.org/analysis/sitcampmex.htm; and Molina Ramírez, Tania. "Recuento de un desastre. El campo en cifras" in Bulletin No 264, Centro de Estudios para el Cambio en el Campo Mexicano, 12 January 2003. www.ceccam.org.mx

14 "Documento de Postura del Frente Democrático Campesino de Chihuahua". Mimeo, 24 April 2003.

15 For further information about the Human Development Index by regions and states, cf. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano México 2002*.

Migration has become a much more complex phenomenon than it was previously. Now rural workers emigrate definitively, they do not go alone but take their family with them, and they look for jobs in a range of employment sectors, rather than just agriculture. This form of "economic self-exile" is more like an indirect way of expelling hundreds of people who benefit in no way from the Government's policies, but are hit by all their negative consequences.

It is well known that most of the migrants cross, or try to cross, the northern border without documentation, risking their lives in their desperation to find some means of survival for themselves and their families. On the journey many men and women, young people, and even children die from a variety of causes: the hostile desert climate, a lack of food and water, being bitten by poisonous insects or attacked by wild animals, suffocating in the trucks where they are hidden, drowning in rivers and waterways, or death from abuse and attacks by the very people who are transporting them, the so-called *polleros*. They come up against the power of the big business of traffic in people without papers, as well as corruption, indifference and even negligence on the part of Mexican emigration authorities. They are the victims of abuse, ill treatment and other inhuman practices by the border patrols and other US authorities who have made immigration without the required documents a criminal offence. Once they have crossed the border they are still not safe, as they are often the victims of xenophobia and racism on the part of the locals, or white supremacist groups who even target agricultural workers who are already settled in the country. Once the new arrivals have settled, they are subject to various kinds of exploitation including economic, labour and sexual, perpetuating the vicious circle of human insecurity.

After the attacks of 11 September, the bilateral Mexican-US agenda on immigration was extended to include connections between national security and immigration. In January 2004 President Bush sent a bill to Congress proposing a new programme which would allow millions of workers without documentation, and people from other countries who had offers of employment in the United States, to work legally for three years, with the possibility of an extension if a United States citizen could not be found to do the job in question.¹⁶ However, even if this proposal of a new programme for temporary immi-

grant workers in the United States is eventually adopted, it has flaws and is too limited to resolve such a complex problem. Besides this, in the context of economic interdependence, the United States Government ought not to define its immigration policy unilaterally.

Conclusions

A primary objective of both the presidential, legislative and judicial agendas must be to protect and promote human security. In December 2003 President Vicente Fox made a commitment to set up a National Human Rights Programme based on the recommendations of the national Diagnosis that identified structural obstacles to human rights, and therefore to human security. If it is actually established, the national programme will indicate that the political will to address these problems exists, but it will have to be judged on how effectively it is implemented. What is more, it is essential that, in tackling the social and economic problems of the country, such as are outlined in this report, the State adopt an integrated approach in line with its commitments and obligations regarding human rights, above all economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, which it has so far not shown any real interest in promoting or protecting. ■

¹⁶ News service in Washington, 8 January 2004. "Bush proposes big US immigration system reform. It would give temporary legality to workers without documentation." International Information Programs of the US Department of State. <http://usinfo.state.gov/>