



Unequal Geographies

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Three documents with international distribution – and very different in their origin, dimensions, features and spatial and temporal implications – have recently been published.

These documents are listed here below in chronological order:

- 23 May 2015: *Encyclical letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home* [Encyc.].
- 25 September 2015: *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* [2030 Ag.].
- 18 October 2015 (on the occasion of EXPO 2015, the day of the handing over of the Milan Charter to Ban Ki-Moon on the World Food Day): *The Milan Charter* [Milan Ch.].

However, in all their diversity they do have a number of converging elements; for this reason it is interesting to reflect on what they have in common.

A first common element is represented by the spatial scale that is planetary in all three documents, even though with specific evaluations aimed at the different regional structures. This is the Common Home that is found in the very title of the Encyclical and which we must have proper care of; this same concern is reiterated in the

Agenda: “We reaffirm that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our common home and that ‘Mother Earth’ is a common expression in a number of countries and regions” [2030 Ag., 59]. And as follows in the Milan Charter: “We are all inter-related and all responsible as guardians of the Earth, for protecting territory and its environmental value” [Milan Ch., *We are aware that*].

Even though differently developed, the guiding thread at the basis of the documents is constituted by the denouncing of the planetary imbalance existing in terms of accessibility to and economic exploitation of resources. Such imbalance is produced by the profound socio-spatial inequalities generated in levels of quality of life which are becoming more and more serious and continuously changing owing to the acceleration of mobility – material and virtual – which highlights them in a relentless comparison. The planetary imbalance – marked by the classical distinction between the North and South of the world – is economic, demographic, sanitary, alimentary, cultural-scholastic etc. Inequalities regarding death and birth, illness or food, education and the use of free time in the relationship existing between the persisting income disparities are recurrent in geography studies that analyse them in their many possible combinations, which can vary in

a very short space of time indeed since the factors at stake are many. Furthermore, making the scenarios more complex is the changing role of the different countries in the big geographical areas on the international arena, including the wealthier ones which constitute the engines of globalisation. The full understanding of the causes and the events generating similar inequalities therefore becomes a geographic goal of social as well as economic interest.

The equality/inequality dialectic – comparable with many other concepts, among which undoubtedly the fundamental ones of freedom and equity – takes on explosive strength when placed side by side with the situations deriving from the societies and cultures hinged on the dangerous throwaway/rubbish binomial, two sides of the same coin, which have become integrated in a terrible vicious circle. In fact, waste concerns refusal, as the result of a choice, that considers something or someone as poor quality, of low value or of inferior quality. The culture of waste can also lead to the refusal of diversity, which on the contrary can be translated into a great value of differences and varieties. Society – in particular the new generations and those who are in charge of their education – should have the instruments necessary to demolish the risk of absolutist, generalising and eventually short-sighted definitions, which hinder the recognition of the specificities and peculiarities of single groups and individuals in their preciously different existence. Many “problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish” [Encyc., 22].

Waste derives from a consumption made in an excessive quantity or which is unsuited to the aims attainable; in any case it is based on an improper if not immoral use of resources. In a perspective of environmental justice to communities, the right to control over resources should be recognised.

“We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels” [Encyc., 27]. And on the other hand “each year, 1.3 billion tonnes of food produced for human

consumption is wasted or lost in the food supply chain” [Milan Ch., *We consider it unacceptable that*].

The hope for the future (2030 for the Agenda) is an ecologically correct management which aims at the reduction of waste, recycling and reuse. This is a hope that goes in the opposite direction of the mainstream goals dictated by the consumer society. The 2030 Agenda recognises that in order to achieve sustainable development, advances in three areas are needed: economic, social and environmental, tackled in a simultaneous and integrated way. Goal 12 (*Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*) states that: “12.3 By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses. - 12.4 By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment. - 12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse” [2030 Ag.].

In this strategic context is the use of the planet’s resources which “should be managed in an equitable, rational and efficient manner, so that they are not excessively exploited or used to benefit some people at the expense of others [Milan Ch., *We consider it unacceptable that*].

Another important element consists in the fact that the three documents focus on present day issues (examined also in a future intergenerational perspective), which are of great interest for research and geography didactics. As well as the economic and socio-cultural aspects produced by the Humanity-Earth relationships, the rightly concerned attention is turned to the environmental consequences of the ongoing anthropisation processes. The Encyclical of the Holy Father Francis has been labelled by the mass media as *green, ecological, environmental...* This is undoubtedly true, but perhaps the adjective *geographical* would be more suitable and, in any case, would better

embrace the many and varied contents present in the Encyclical.

Stephanie Kirchgaessner and John Hooper write in *The Guardian* of 16 June 2015: “The Argentinean pope will align himself with the environmental movement and its objectives. While accepting that there may be some natural causes of global warming, the pope will also state that climate change is mostly a man-made problem”.

The powerful denunciation made in Chapter I *Pollution and climate change* spans the great areas of general geography, highlighting the extremely serious situations that the poorer populations above all have to face: “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded” [Encyc., 25].

With a different approach – as is obvious owing to the very different kind of document – the problem of climate change is dealt with by the 2030 Agenda, which in the search for a political solution too does not underestimate its seriousness either. The subject is set out above all in Goal 13 (*Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*): “13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries - 13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning - 13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning - 13.a Implement the commitment undertaken by developed-country parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to a goal of mobilizing jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation and fully operationalize the Green Climate Fund through its capitalization as soon as possible

13.b Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities” [2030 Ag., 13]. In realtà tutti i 17 Goal dell’Agenda 2030 riguardano le tematiche geografiche.

Once again with regard to the huge and very difficult challenges to which humanity on a global scale should address, it must be remembered that on 13 September 2015 the three international councils of the natural, social and human sciences (ICSU, ISSC and CIPSH) proclaimed at the World Social Science Forum at Durban, South Africa, 2016 as the International Year of Global Understanding (IYGU - Executive Director Benno Werlen).

The Program foresees that the IYGU

- connects local actions and global challenges.
- focuses on the global sustainability of local action.
- recognizes culturally different paths to global sustainability.

A last short reflection concerns the educational aspects to be found either directly or indirectly in the three documents which, moreover, involve the strategic dialogue between research and education. With regard to this, it would be of great interest to analyse and look in greater detail at the *International Declaration on Research in Geography Education* drawn up by the International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education, and which begins as follows: “Geography in education is the study of the Earth, its natural and physical environments, human activities and social changes, the interrelationships and interactions of these and their effects, from local to global scales; and, among many skills, it uses mapping and fieldwork. When taught well geography makes a fundamental contribution to the education of all children and young people, promoting the development of citizenship. Ensuring the quality of geography education is, consequently, of great significance to policy makers and education leaders internationally”.