
Excessive paper consumption: The impacts of injustice

In the world of today, many millions of people's level of consumption does not even cover their basic needs. In plain language, these are millions of people – mostly children – suffering from hunger and misery. On the other hand, there are also millions of people – although much fewer – who consume too much, without this meaning that their basic needs – as human beings – are thus satisfied.

The result of this situation is not only an unjust world – which of course it is – but a world that is moving straight towards environmental disaster. Not precisely because of those who consume too little, but because of those who consume in excess. Although this is applicable to practically any product – from oil to shrimps – the consumption of paper and paperboard serves to exemplify the problem.

The annual per capita world consumption of paper and paperboard amounted to 52 kilos in 2004 (1). As with all averages, this hides the disproportion between the big consumers and the small ones. In fact, citizens of the so-called “developed” countries consumed an average of 175 kilos per person, while those from the so-called “developing countries” consumed a scant 20 kilos. These averages also conceal the fact that in some countries of the North consumption is well above the average – such as in the cases of Finland (334 kgs), the United States (312) and Japan (250) – as well as the fact that a supposedly “low” consumption of 20 kilos may be perfectly adequate to cover basic needs for paper.

The issue at stake is that this excessive consumption generates serious negative impacts on the life of millions of people in the South. Paper and paperboard are made from pulp, and timber is needed to produce it. Increasingly pulp comes from enormous monoculture plantations, particularly pine, eucalyptus and acacia trees.

These monoculture tree plantations are established in regions fulfilling various conditions: rapid tree growth, access to vast areas of cheap and fertile land, low labour costs, availability of State subsidies and support, and scant environmental monitoring. Basically: the South.

The result is the same country after country: land falling into the hands of large and foreign corporate landowners, concentration of power, eviction of the rural population, net loss of jobs on a local level, depletion of soil and water resources, loss of biodiversity. Despite the promises of “development” accompanying plantations, the impacts only worsen as the area under plantation grows. This is easy to see in countries with millions of hectares of plantations such as South Africa, Brazil, Chile and Indonesia.

The problem becomes even more serious when mills producing pulp for export are established near the plantation areas with the consequent social and environmental impacts. Aracruz and Veracel in Brasil, Arauco in Chile and Argentina, Sappi and Mondi in South Africa and Swaziland, Advance Agro in Thailand, Asia Pulp and Paper in Indonesia are well-known examples of the serious negative impacts of this industry.

And all for what purpose? So that the paper industry can have abundant and cheap pulp to continue expanding its markets and increasing its profits with the permanent invention of new “needs.”

The result – in particular in the North but increasingly replicated in the South – is the imposition of an excessive consumption of paper. Examples are abundant. An astonishing number of paper and cardboard throw away items such as drinking cups, plates, trays, napkins and even tablecloths are replacing – on a massive level- similar lasting articles. It is now usual when you purchase something - a toy, a watch, a pair of shoes – for it to come wrapped in paper, in a cardboard box and handed over to the buyer in a paper bag. People’s homes are invaded every morning by non-requested correspondence consisting of advertisements printed on paper. Finally, everyone is forced to consume a daily dose of paper and paperboard that no-one ever asked for or wished to consume.

The issue therefore goes beyond the responsibility of the individual consumer and is framed in the wider context of the consumer society. Therefore, simply putting the blame on the individual cannot solve it; it is an issue that must be addressed at the level of society as a whole.

At this stage the societies of the North must understand that their life style – in which consumption occupies an exaggerated position – is affecting the possibilities for subsistence of people with the same rights in other parts of the world. They must also understand that this excessive consumption is leading the planet towards environmental disaster, which is already evident in climate change, water depletion and pollution and loss of biodiversity, among others.

The excessive and unnecessary use of paper and cardboard is only one example of many others but it may serve to trigger off the necessary debate – particularly in the North – regarding the limits that should be placed on consumption and identify mechanisms to bring this about. The wise words of Gandhi “There is enough in the world for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed" may serve to illuminate such a debate.

(1) World Resources Institute.- Resource Consumption: Paper and paperboard consumption per capita

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