

A makeshift editorial

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We are all aware that our world, the planet where we live, is facing a number of serious problems, and one of the most grievous of those problems at present is that of Africa. The continent that was the cradle of mankind, the place where *Homo* became *sapiens sapiens*, is now an open wound that, as suggested by the title of this year's monographic issue, constitutes a challenge for the world.

If it is true that nothing human can be foreign to us, today we must feel a mixture of shame, compassion and a great deal of anger for what the distributive injustice of the dominant socio-economic system has done to the myriad possibilities offered by a continent such as Africa. From the slavery of the past to the epidemics of today, by way of the political and economic colonialism of not so long ago, Africa is one the world's most downtrodden continents, although, unfortunately, it is not the only one.

The Editorial Committee of *Sostenible?* were quick to agree that Africa, with its massive problems, was an inevitable, and even urgent, subject for a magazine like ours. Unfortunately, the limited size of our publication makes it impossible to give a comprehensive view of the difficulties faced by the most unfairly treated continent in the recent history of humanity, but at least we had to try.

Alfred Bosch, lecturer of History of Africa at Pompeu Fabra University, reminds us very aptly that *Everyone is African*, a historically undeniable truth that applies to the whole of his contribution on the subject of the historical context before, during and after colonialism.

Continuing with the general and documentary perspectives of Africa, the article by Mbuyi Kabunda, lecturer of the African Studies Group at the Autonomous University of Madrid, aims to provide us with an *Overview of Africa's Principal Sociocultural, Environmental and Political Realities*, to complement what is offered as an initial and rapid survey of the overall circumstances of the African continent.

We then wished to provide our readers with a detailed examination of some of the most pressing problems affecting Africa today. We cannot cover all of them here, and most of them are dealt with in several of the articles

published in this issue, but we feel that mention must be made of such a basic consideration as the possibility of mere physical and material survival in certain regions of continent that are suffering the apocalyptic scourge of famine. The author of the study on this subject is Josep Xercavins, co-ordinator of the UNESCO Chair at the Technical University of Catalonia, who offers us an excerpt from his recent doctoral thesis on the subject of *Carrying Capacity in East Sub-Saharan Africa*. This area includes countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, which are perhaps the hardest hit on the African continent in terms of the fundamental concept of "self-sufficiency in food", the capacity of a region to support and meet its population's material survival requirements.

As mentioned above, there many more very serious problems affecting Africa, but for obvious reasons of space, not all of them can be dealt with here. Perhaps one of the problems least often examined is where Africa stands in respect of one of the factors that seem most determinant for the configuration of the modern world, i.e. the science, technology and research that could contribute (or not contribute) to the development of a continent like Africa. If modern technoscience has played such an important role in changing the modern world (not always for the better), it is certainly worthwhile to reflect on its effects and possibilities in Africa. This is the aim of Christoph Stein, co-ordinator of the project *Across the Water* of the WWF, in his article on *Technology, Research and Development in Africa*.

Having surveyed the overall situation and a few of the many problems affecting Africa, it was then time to look at proposals. This is the aim of the article by Godfrey K. M'Mwereria, who, from the association SONED-Africa, in Kenya, attempts to analyse what might be the suitable *Human Action Proposals for a Sustainable Development* on the African continent. In his brief but surprisingly intense and effective article, M'Mwereria sets out a possible basis for urgent and indispensable action to build a less desperate future in the face of the challenge that Africa poses for the world.

From a complementary standpoint, Fatma Alloo, founder director of the NGO Resource Centre (NGORC) in Zanzibar, reminds us how and why the rich of the north, at their meetings in Davos, Switzerland, and the Economic and Social Forum, strive to take advantage, for as long as they can, of a situation that is favourable for them while doing nothing to solve existing problems. This is summed up in the title of her article: *Making Hay While the Sun Shines*.

To finish off and move down to the details of specific cases, Momar Coumba Diop, a researcher at Dakar University's Fundamental Institute of Black Africa, offers us a detailed analysis of the specific case of an African country in his

article *Senegal: Economic Reform and Social Reconstruction*. This is just one of many possibilities, and we hope that it will serve as a more or less representative example.

And so, the aim of this issue, on the whole, is to take an initial and necessarily incomplete look with the intent of presenting to our readers, in their diversity and with their interdisciplinary background, the reality of a continent that is now, as in the title of this monographic edition, a true challenge on a global scale.

Leaving aside purely informative and political considerations, the basic question, then, at least from an ethical standpoint, is that of the propitiatory victim, a question that we find in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and is expressed succinctly by William James (1842–1910) in his *The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life*: "If we were to be presented with the hypothesis of a world that surpassed all of the utopias of Fourier, Bellamy and Morris, where thousands of people lived in permanent happiness, with the sole condition that one unfortunate soul had to lead, in some remote place, a life of solitary torment, what else but a specific and independent emotion could lead us to feel immediately (in spite of the impulse that we would feel to accept the happiness so offered us) the monstrosity of enjoying it while knowingly accepting it as the result of such an exchange?"

This hypothesis is brilliantly reflected in the story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* by the American writer Ursula K. Le Guin. Omelas is an example of this sort of happy society built on the permanent torment and unhappiness of a propitiatory victim. And yet there are ones who walk away from Omelas, who turn their back on a happiness that is rooted in the unhappiness of others.

Put differently in relation to the matter at hand, how is it that we selfish inhabitants of the first world can continue to enjoy the comforts available to us while knowing that not just one but millions of human beings live the life of torment offered by the African continent to the majority of people who are born there? Is Africa our propitiatory victim? For how much longer?