



IDRC FEATURE

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CATASTROPHE... OR NEW SOCIETY?

by ALEXANDER DOROZYNSKI

Is the world headed for catastrophe? This is what the authors of the popular book Limits to Growth affirmed a few years ago. According to this world model, a computer projection of the current world situation and trends into the future, natural resources will soon be exhausted, pollution will overwhelm the planet and famine will be widespread.

Today, another report published by Latin American specialists refutes this theory. It is possible, they say, for the entire world population to attain a reasonable standard of living... on condition that a world policy be implemented to this end.

This new study was carried out at the Bariloche Foundation in Argentina under the direction of Professor Amilcar O. Herrera, a geologist. The report, published in a condensed version under the title Catastrophe or New Society?, rejects Limits to Growth's approach because of its insistence on the need to contain population growth. Its authors also take issue with the earlier model on the grounds that it does not take into account any differences between regions or the fact that 25 percent of the world's population is consuming over 85 percent of its non-renewable resources.

The Bariloche Foundation's study also starts from known statistics on population, agricultural production, availability of funds, urban and industrial development and so forth. These are arranged in mathematical equations that interact as the computer projects them into the future. In this way, the researchers are able to forecast what this data becomes in 10, 20 or 50 years.

But Professor Herrera and his team had also set an objective for the study: the satisfaction of man's basic needs, defined as adequate food, education, health services and housing. From these factors, and a number of others, the

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mathematical model attempted not only to forecast the future, but to determine if such an "ideal" society, free of underdevelopment, could be reached. To direct the evolution of the model towards the desired end, certain premises were set forth, for example:

- . a production system aimed at the satisfaction of basic needs as the team defined them;
- . a slowing down of economic growth in the industrialized countries in order to narrow the gap between developed and developing countries;
- . a global increase in life expectancy which barely reaches 40 years in certain countries, while in others it is superior to 70 years.

Catastrophe or New Society?'s conclusions are optimistic: there are no physical limitations to the attainment of the objective. The world mineral resources are sufficient and potential reserves of thorium and uranium are adequate to supply nuclear power for an almost indefinite future.

It would, therefore, be possible to create the "ideal" society in which man's fundamental needs are satisfied, and this objective could be reached in 1990 in Latin America and in 2008 in Africa. Because of Asia's denser population, food production poses a major problem and a significant increase will be needed if sufficient calories and protein are to be made available to everyone.

As for population growth -- Limits to Growth's main obstacle -- it becomes, according to Herrera and his team, a function of socio-economic conditions. "The only truly adequate way of controlling population growth is by improving basic living conditions", says the report. Their model predicts a gradual reduction of the growth rate as living conditions improve, levelling off at some 12 billion people by the year 2060.

The study, carried out with the help of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, stresses, however, that radical changes in current policies and social conditions will be needed if the world is to be freed from underdevelopment, oppression and misery. "Whether this actually occurs or not will depend upon the will and actions of men."

Catastrophe or New Society, A Latin American World Model is available from the IDRC, P.O. Box 8500, Ottawa, Canada, K1G 3H9.

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In Latin America, the goals of adequate nutrition, education and housing could be reached by the early 1990's.

PHOTO: Jaime Rojas
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