

Rio+20: (Un)Sustainability and Public Health

Twenty years have elapsed since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio-92 or the Earth Summit, and Rio de Janeiro is once again hosting one of the most important international meetings in the quest for the much vaunted “sustainable development”, an expression that has become common parlance, but that until today has different interpretations as to its true meaning. Since 1992, when important negotiations seeking to protect ecosystems were agreed – such as the Convention on Climate Change and Biodiversity, as well as the establishment of Agenda 21 – the socio-environmental crisis has worsened. In this context, this issue of the Science and Public Health journal (“Ciência e Saúde Coletiva”) is adding its contribution of broad disciplinary knowledge from our field to the Rio+20 debates.

Within the scope of this event, it is important to draw attention to the importance that health should have in this debate, since the adverse impacts on health are increasingly associated with the socio-environmental crisis. The human suffering imposed by the effects of climate change such as droughts, floods and landslides, the resurgence of infecto-contagious diseases, food insecurity, as well as the exposure of workers and the general population to chemicals, due to the intensive and extensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides are examples of these impacts. Associated with these phenomena there is also the continuous territorial displacement of populations and the assassination of leaders who advocate the preservation of the lifestyles of traditional communities in the countryside and forests, due to the interests of capitalism, which dominate our economic model.

However, despite the fact that health is inseparable from any attempt striving for sustainable development, the agenda of negotiations seeking solutions to the socio-environmental crisis has been dominated by economic mechanisms, without considering the meaning of human life. One of the central themes of Rio+20 is the so-called “green economy”, in other words one with low carbon emissions. Similarly to the creation of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and the consequent creation of a carbon market, these initiatives aimed at alleviating the pressure that we exert on the planet, though without effectively tackling the structural causes of the problem, which are the modes of production and consumption typical of the capitalist logic. On the contrary, its representatives seek to preserve the form of domination of transnational capital, supported by its National States.

Science, in a general manner, has aligned itself to this hegemonic thinking, seeking merely to mitigate the impact of human activities on ecosystems, while supporting capitalist domination. The scientific literature over the past 30 years shows how the terms “mitigation strategies” associated with “climate change” are appearing with increasing frequency. There were no mentions from 1981-1990, 89 references from 1991-2000, and 618 mentions from 2001-2010.

We are therefore faced with two paths, with different and contradictory rationales and interests, to confront the socio-environmental crisis to be juxtaposed in Rio+20. On the one hand there is the green economy agenda of official forums, which seeks the mercantilization of nature through the establishment of new markets – like the carbon market – in which capitalism is seen as the solution to the crisis imposed by capitalism per se. On the other hand, there is the agenda of the Peoples’ Summit, to which the Abrasco Working Group on Health and the Environment is aligned. The latter will take place in tandem with the official event and is based on building a society upon a solidarity economy and on agroecology, which seeks to preserve nature as a communal asset. We believe that this second path can only be built upon the articulation of the social struggles of urban workers, the feminist collectives, environmentalists, people affected by the environmental risks, traditional and ethnic groups, supported by a “committed science”, based on values and methods attuned to these movements. The configuration of this model is our greatest challenge.

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Guest editors