

**HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES****Demographic transition in the Mediterranean: between rising risks and the necessary adaptations of humanitarian practices**

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The Mediterranean is at the centre of the humanitarian attention as a place of deadly migrations, practically a cemetery whose ignominy is constantly denounced by NGOs. But it is also the cradle of a civilisation and of populations which, on its shores, will have to face the stakes of the demographic transition.

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Since the writings of William Petty (1682) and Thomas Malthus (1798), population growth has constantly given rise to all kinds of fears: not being able to live on the food we grow and the advent of widespread starvation, seeing our world disappear as we exhaust its natural resources, increasing political unrest between nations, etc. In this age of global warming these fears are experiencing a certain new lease on life. Reputable organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Population Matters and the Worldwatch Institute do not shy away from waving the red flag of demographic explosion in some developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (2.1 billion people in 2050 and 3.7 billion in 2100<sup>1</sup>), to express their concern about our common future.

Over 300 years have passed since the first fears were expressed, with a planet whose population has now grown seven-fold since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the constantly revised thresholds of the maximum level of population simply being swept aside. There is no doubt that the world is filling up, that there is increasing inequality, and that new types of risks and crises are emerging. Imperfect demographic transition<sup>2</sup> in the south is undoubtedly compounding the fears and the phenomena observed, but is an increasing population the only explanation for our difficulties? Why should it be based on a development model that has been the rule since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a model that has not expressed adequate concern for our resources or for the inequality it generates and is unable to resolve?

To answer these questions and assess the challenges raised by what population studies are telling us, we shall consider the Mediterranean region, which stands at the crossroads of the most symbolic challenges posed by the relationship between development and mal-development, and the effects of the economic, social, political and demographic reconfiguration between rich and poor countries. With the development paradigm unchanging, this article will discuss the risks associated with demographic change and global warming in this geographical area, and will then suggest areas of debate for the humanitarian sector with a particular view to anticipating change.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “World Population Prospects 2019 Highlights”, 2019, <https://www.ined.fr/en/glossary/demographic-transition/>. Observed in most countries but at different periods in history, it has given rise to the theory of the same name which allows global population growth to be examined in the short, medium and long terms.

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### New risks for an increasingly populated region

The cradle of some of the greatest civilisations ever seen in the history of humanity, the Mediterranean region is now particularly symbolic for north-south relations and the challenges playing out around the issue of development and global warming. With rich and industrialised countries to the north facing countries that are still young and developing to the south, it has become a crossroads for a series of economic, environmental, social and geopolitical problems upon which population studies are shedding some valuable light.

Firstly, we should remember that we are dealing with a densely populated region (its 22 countries account for 7% of the world's population), with 150 million people living in its coastal regions alone: a huge concentration of people that, without being alarmist, we have to correlate with the risks to the seashore, such as the impending rise in sea levels, the erosion of rocky coastlines, landslides, and the potential risk of submarine landslides and tsunamis, as discussed in many scientific reports<sup>3</sup>, not to mention the increasing population in urban areas where disasters could potentially lead to a huge number of victims.

Secondly, there is the demographic shift (identifiable at the global level) between rich countries and developing countries, ageing countries, declining countries and others that are still booming. The Mediterranean is therefore marked by the end of the demographic transition in the north, with a population that is generally ageing (the average age was 42.2 in 2017), and a rapidly declining natural growth rate in the majority of the countries, particularly in southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece, where the fertility rate varies between 1.34 and 1.38 children per woman<sup>4</sup>. The growth rate is still generally high in the south, with an average 2 children per woman in Turkey<sup>5</sup> and 3.2 in Egypt<sup>6</sup>. Nor should we forget Sub-Saharan Africa (not that far away), whose population is still growing rapidly with a fertility rate that is generally very high (an average 4.8 children per woman)<sup>7</sup>. All these elements signal major economic, social and geopolitical changes that will be discussed below.

Lastly, it is at the centre of a phenomenon of primary importance, largely related to the Syrian conflict and the situation in Libya which, via Turkey, Greece, then Italy and Spain have provoked the “migratory crisis” as well as revealing the “asylum crisis”. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate that 1.8 million migrants reached European shores between 2014 and 2018, including 1 million in 2014 alone<sup>8</sup>. Although the flows have fallen dramatically since then, in particular with the signing of an agreement with Turkey in 2016, and then with Libya in 2017, this problem is still far from being resolved, as witnessed by the terrible estimates for the number of people who have lost their lives, drowned, trying to cross the Mediterranean on makeshift boats: 17,260 dead or disappeared between 2014 and 2018.

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<sup>3</sup> Cahier thématique du groupe de travail « Mer et littoral » du GREC-PACA, « La mer et le littoral de Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur face au changement climatique », AIR, mai 2017. Rapport sur le développement durable de la Méditerranée, Sénat, février 2017, Assemblée nationale. ENERGIES2050 – Institut de la Méditerranée – FEMISE. « Les défis du changement climatique en Méditerranée : la Méditerranée dans le nouvel Agenda climatique international », Guides pour Agir, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Data from EUROSTAT, 2018, based on 2016 data.

<sup>5</sup> Only Lebanon has a rate that is lower than the growth rate, with 1.7 children per woman.

<sup>6</sup> Data from the World Bank, online, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Even though there are some significant nuances, mainly between the two extremes of Cape Verde (2.3 children per woman) and Niger (7.2 children per woman) / Data from the World Bank, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> « Migrations vers l'Europe, les chiffres et les routes », *Le Monde*, 28 juin 2018, [https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/06/28/migrations-vers-l-europe-les-chiffres-et-les-routes\\_5322410\\_3214.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2018/06/28/migrations-vers-l-europe-les-chiffres-et-les-routes_5322410_3214.html) Frontex, the European border and coastguard agency created by the EU and Schengen Area member states in 2004, estimates that there were 3.5 million illegal entries into Europe between 2009 and 2018.

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Even though some of these reasons seem to be digressions from the subject under discussion here, the common denominator is the vulnerability of and risks incurred by the increasing densification of populations in coastal areas, especially when the risks raised above are known. Some of the reasons cited, however, do highlight the demographic challenges between the northern and southern coastlines, the ongoing and observable differences between levels of development and the perceived attraction of the north, and the constant flow of migrants.

### **An outlook showing an increase in momentum for current trends**

Looking at the demographic transition as it currently stands and what it tells us about the future, we cannot help but see that the trends suggested by the state of affairs presented above will undoubtedly gain momentum. Firstly, because the scenarios presented by the UN, which have been consistently and regularly revised upwards for the past twenty years, show that 11 billion individuals will be living on the planet by 2100. Secondly, because the continent of Africa will be the most affected by this population explosion given that it will account for 25% of the population in 2050 and then 40% by the end of the century<sup>9</sup>. Lastly, because the Mediterranean will also see high population growth, although admittedly to a lesser extent, due to its attractiveness and also to the ongoing transition in certain countries on its southern and eastern shores.

The first thing to note about these forecasts is that countries on the southern shores will account for 62% of the region's population<sup>10</sup> by 2025, a symbolic reversal in just 50 years<sup>11</sup> that must be analysed according to two parameters: the presence of a population that is generally younger and more dynamic in the south, and, a sign of the advance of demographic transition, improved life expectancy everywhere, harking back to the existence of a population whose average age will be higher everywhere.

We should also note the continuation of the deep-set worldwide trend that is the urbanisation of the population which, for the Mediterranean, will increasingly reveal, day by day, a whole range of characteristics that must be taken into consideration: the growth of large towns, ongoing spontaneous and unchecked urbanisation in a large number of countries on the southern and eastern shores, and its concentration on the coast where natural risks are greatest.

There is also a challenge, raised above, whose scenarios highlight the major changes to come, particularly for the humanitarian aid sector: ongoing migration and the imbalances it may bring on a social, economic and political level. Let's recall the words of A. Missirian and W. Schlenker from 2017 in a rare study of the impact of climate change on migration in developing countries<sup>12</sup>: according to the positive scenario of slow warming (a fall in greenhouse-gas emissions), applications for asylum in the EU are predicted to increase by 28% by 2100 (i.e. 98,000 extra requests per year); if emissions continue to rise, the current number of applications for asylum is predicted to triple, i.e. an additional 660,000 applications per year.

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects...", *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Source: Plan Bleu. Les grandes menaces pesant sur le bassin méditerranéen, les perspectives du Plan bleu à 2025, HL. Thibault.

<sup>11</sup> The population of countries on the northern shores accounted for 59% of the Mediterranean's population in 1970.

<sup>12</sup> Anouch Missirian, Wolfram Schlenker, "Asylum applications respond to temperature fluctuations", *Science*, 358 (6370), 2017.

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### Demographic shifts that will force humanitarian aid practices to change

Population studies and the humanitarian aid sector are undeniably linked, especially where understanding situations and developing tools to help adapt interventions in the best possible manner and anticipate future risks is concerned.

Population studies provide the humanitarian aid sector with vital information on the size and characteristics of the populations affected by crises, be they political (conflicts), natural (droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis etc.) or health-related (pandemics): information that is vital for defining an intervention strategy and the appropriate scale of the means to commit to the victims, be they settled or itinerant, young or old, destitute and vulnerable or stable and protected, both upstream and downstream from a disaster.

Demography also tries to see into the future, preparing scenarios that tell us what tomorrow's world will look like in terms of the number of people, changes in life expectancy, possible power relationships between various parts of the world – again, this information is indispensable for anticipating and reflecting on how to adapt both development and humanitarian aid practices.

With regard to the latter point, which lies at the very heart of our example, population studies clearly show that rich countries are increasingly less immune to vulnerability, inequality and imbalance, and that to this end, humanitarian organisations must constantly question the tropism that encourages them to focus their concerns on the southern hemisphere alone.

The scenarios drawn up by demographers also show that populations have and will increasingly feature aspects that are currently not yet present everywhere: increasing urbanisation in the north and in the south requiring intervention methods that differ to a certain extent from those deployed in rural settings, and ageing populations, mainly in the north but also in a certain number of developing countries, whose problems (as we saw in the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan in 2011) differ from those of young, or even very young, populations (such as those affected by drought in the Horn of Africa that same year) and which, beyond the very nature of the disaster itself, require means of support that reflect the specific fragility of elderly people. This is a new trend in the humanitarian aid sector, which mainly used to operating in “poor” and “young” countries.

Environments that are therefore affected by new types of vulnerability in contexts that are not necessarily and not totally devoid of resources and skills, requiring intervention methods and practices to be adapted by relying on the support of local actors and the possibility that they will take over the running of the intervention.

Everything seems to show that the study of populations and how they change must systematically be correlated to what global warming itself is telling us the future risks will be. In this respect, and the Mediterranean is a prime example, the humanitarian sector is – and will be – increasingly concerned by the consequences of global warming (its social, healthcare and territorial impact).

The development model that has held sway since the 19<sup>th</sup> century is, inevitably, showing its limits. Humanitarian organisations can no longer settle for managing human crises without thinking about the planet's future. More than ever before, everything points to a connection being made between humanitarian aid and the considerations of global warming, and between emergencies and the very nature of development in order to save the planet, and with it, the future of humankind.

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The population studies and development scenarios produced by demographers highlight the risks that this generates, and the regions and problems requiring long-term interventions. At any rate, this is what a study of the Mediterranean region shows when we bear in mind the challenges raised by its geographical position straddling the north and the south. If demography is to be considered as an indicator or a subject of reflection for the humanitarian aid sector, what it has to say is therefore a good place from which to start. If we do not change our development model, there may well be an increase in potential reversals, but also in the number of risks and crises. The issue of vulnerability can no longer be reduced to an erstwhile convenient interpretation involving north-south imbalances, which are often used to justify the compelling presence of humanitarian aid – over there, rather than over here.

*Translated from the French by Derek Scoins*

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