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MMS Sensitisation Campaign on the ECOPOP Initiative Family Planning as Part of Political Campaigns

Von Martin Leschhorn Strebel

After almost 40 years of silence population control seems to be back in the debate of global development policy. Shaped by population theories of Thomas Robert Malthus in the 19th century, the axiom that certain populations are not able to control their reproduction on their own and are therefore punished by their natural environment in not delivering enough food is repeated again in public debates – such as experienced last year in Switzerland. We document an article written for the Annual Report for the Network Medicus Mundi International.



In Britain the TV naturalist Sir David Attenborough told a Radio Station last January that human population growth must be limited: “We are a plague on the Earth. It’s coming home to roost over the next 50 year or so. It’s not just climate change; it’s sheer space, place to grow food for this enormous horde.” You may take this for unwise words of an old man. We see it as quite deeply rooted thinking, which takes its power in our days from insecurity and fears in the context of globalisation and ecological threats.

In November 2014 Swiss citizens were called to the ballot-box for voting on the so called Ecopop initiative that not only wanted to limit the migration to Switzerland, but asked as well that 10% of the Swiss development cooperation budget would be earmarked for voluntary family planning.

Xenophobia with internationalism

The initiative combined two issues which seemed not to be interrelated. The groups behind the initiative claimed that the reduction of migration would reduce ecological damages within Switzerland. In proclaiming so the initiative fuelled xenophobia in Switzerland. Secondly it requested the Swiss Government to invest more in voluntary family planning in developing countries – in order to reducing the population pressure from abroad. Paradoxically this claim reflected – or could be misunderstood as – an internationalist approach.

For understanding the link between the two issues one should know the background of the people behind the initiative. Ecopop is an association that was founded in the seventies of the last century. In its view overpopulation is the cause of all ecological problems – “uncontrolled” population development in developing countries would threaten our planet – neglecting that the ecological damages worldwide are mainly caused by the rich, not really “over-populated” countries.

A differentiated position of Medicus Mundi Switzerland

The initiative challenged quite many of Medicus Mundi Switzerland's member organisations as they are working with family planning methods as part of a sound intervention to improve women's and children's health or as part of their sexual and reproductive health programmes. So shouldn't they have been happy that the issue was set on the political agenda by a broadly debated initiative? Shouldn't they have welcomed the enforced spending of money for family planning?

By this initiative Swiss development cooperation would have been forced by the constitution to focus on the goal of reducing overpopulation globally. This would have discredited the country's whole development policy.

For good reasons, the board of the Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland as well as many member organisations clearly rejected the Ecopop initiative. (Position Paper in German, pdf) Together they decided to roll out a media campaign to make our point of view heard in the public debate.

The Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland pointed out three arguments against the initiative.

- Voluntary family planning is one of the most cost-effective investments to reduce unwanted pregnancy, as well as maternal and new-born death. But it only makes sense if it is embedded in broader sexual and reproductive health interventions. The strong focus on access to family planning would have weakened an integrated approach to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services along the continuum of care.
- The woman's right to decide if, when and how many children she wants to give birth is a fundamental right. The Cairo International Conference on Population and Development 1994 has brought this crucial change of paradigm in population's policy. The Ecopop initiative would have gone behind these achievements.
- By this initiative Swiss development cooperation would have been forced by the constitution to focus on the goal of reducing overpopulation globally. This would have discredited the country's whole development policy.

To promote our arguments we addressed media directly. In the beginning of the campaign we focused on talking directly with some key newspapers that have certain relevance in Switzerland. For the Neue Zürcher Zeitung we organised a background talk with some experts from our Network members like Iamaneh, Sexual Health Switzerland, Swiss Red Cross and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute. This intervention triggered off several other reports by other medias.

Our point of view competed not only with the view of the Ecopop people but as well with some other NGO's – represented by the influential network Alliance Sud – that rejected the initiative. Their arguments ignored family planning instruments as effective development measures and focused on other topics such as the need for better education and economic development. For the Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland this approach wasn't wrong, but as a Health for All Network we didn't want to ignore that family planning may play a crucial role in improving the health status of a population.

Finally the initiative was rejected clearly by 74% of the Swiss voters. And, in the end, the arguments forwarded by the Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland could highly influence the media's perspective on family planning as part of a rights based, sound intervention for sexual and reproductive health.



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