

**The Subsidiarity Principle in Action:  
The Case of Rwanda**

**NATIONAL CONTEXT**

Rwanda is a small country located at the heart of the Great Lakes Region of East Africa. It shares borders with Burundi to the south, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west, Uganda to the north and Tanzania to the east.

It is probably redundant to remind her status of less developed country, but a brief look at figures may turn up useful for the rest of the article: in 1999 the World Bank estimated a population of 8.3 million growing at a 2.9 % rate per year – one of the highest in the world. Some 92% of the population lives in rural areas and some 70% lives below the poverty threshold. More, Rwanda ranks 164<sup>th</sup> out of 174, in the United Nations Human Development scale.

Furthermore, the State is still paying the price for the 1994 genocide, one of its main legacies being that now one-third of households is headed by women. From an economic perspective, the country has been badly affected by the material, moral, and psychological damage that occurred during the 1990-1994 war. Rwanda is presently going through a period of reconstruction, physical rehabilitation of its socio-economic infrastructure, national reconciliation, and confidence-building between the segments of the

population, and the rebuilding of its economy. To achieve a good recovery some major handicaps must be overcome, including demographic pressure of a growing population, the over-exploitation of the land, insufficient natural resources, the growing backwardness of the rural population, insufficient sources of revenue, a depleted, unproductive, poorly trained and inexperienced labour force, the degradation of the environment, a growing number of vulnerable people, too few products available for exports etc.

In 2000, Rwanda has begun to show the first signs of recovery, the most important economic indicators coming back to the 1990 level. But this means that the country has lost 10 years of economic development.



From a political point of view, the Government seems now stable and dedicated to achieving national reconciliation. In 1994, after taking over the country, the Front Patriotique Rwandais (FPR) formed, in pursuance of the Arusha Accord, a Government of National Unity which, although not elected,

includes representatives from some eight political parties. It is a transitional government of National Reconciliation that fixed a five-year period to reorganise, reconstruct, secure and "democratise" the country through elections. The Inter-Party Forum, by mutual understanding, has extended the initial transition period by four years.

In 2001 the government published an important document called "Vision 2020", which sets the objectives that the government aims to realise by 2020, in order to bring the country out of the category of underdeveloped countries and the condition of poverty.

#### **HEALTH CONDITIONS**

Rwandan health condition is dramatic. Health indicators are not positive, even if compared with Sub-Saharan African averages: infant mortality rate is 130 per 1.000 and life expectancy rate is 50 years.

The main causes of death are malaria, AIDS, breathing and intestinal infections and under-nourishment. Malaria continues to kill because prevention is insufficient, medicines are too expensive for the larger part of the population and they are also inadequate because the virus is becoming stronger. Prevention from the HIV virus is also insufficient, notwithstanding the many information campaigns. In three years, from 1996 to 1999, the peasant population affected by HIV increased from the 1,3 % to 10,8 %. The larger part of Health Centres is developing nutritional programs in order to treat under-nourished children and at the same time teach their mothers the way to assure them a well-balanced nourishment. But they are able to treat

only 10% of cases. Finally, it is worth to stress that Rwandan health system has to face many cases of physical and mental traumas too, mainly as a (dramatic) consequence of the 1994 genocide.

Even such a general picture of the health conditions in Rwanda is enough to understand that the primary and more urgent interventions, both by the government and international organisations, have to be realised in the health sector. Investing in health is an indispensable condition to get “development”: the country needs a healthy and strong population to make up the 10 years of economic growth, lost for the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi. On the contrary, in 2000, government spending on healthcare was reduced by 2%, coming to represent only 4% of the total government spending and about 0,5% of GDP, an impressively low figure, especially if compared with the Sub-Saharan African average of 2%.

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International donors have consistently reduced foreign aid too, because, they alleged, they consider the emergency phase ended and the needs of the country with it.

The national Health System is composed of 358 Health Centres (an average of two per district), 33 functioning district hospitals and 4 referral hospitals, but their utilisation rate is lower than in the other Sub-Saharan African countries. This is because the patient faces several obstacles to attain to the Centres, the most important being poverty, joined to the high costs of treatments and of medicines; moreover, the staff of Health centers is often

unqualified, under-paid and unable to deal with the new diseases, like AIDS and mental and physical traumas. Finally, the patient is often unable to cover the distance that divides him from the closest centre.

### **THE CATHOLIC HEALTH SYSTEM**

A consistent part of the national Health System is supported by the Churches, most importantly by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Health System is composed by 88 Centres and 7 hospitals, managed by the local Caritas, and it serves 30% of the Rwandans (about 2,5 millions). It operates above all in the campaigns and its particular mission is to assure health services to the poor people.

This system is economically based on the patients' contributions and foreign aids, while governmental contributions amount only to a very small part of its budget. In recent years Caritas Rwanda has been faced by some difficulties in the managing of the Centres and hospitals, mainly because of the reduction of foreign and national contributions. This forced it to reduce the economic contributions and the very furniture of medicines to the Centres. Unable to pay the wages of the staff, short of medicines and vaccines, in the absence of an adequate infrastructure and indispensable machinery and, even worse, struck by daily interruptions in the furniture of water and electricity, the Centres' functioning got worse and worse: as a result, the utilisation rate decreased from 47.63% in 1999 to 25.58% in 2001.

Caritas decided to meet this challenge and to prepare itself adequately for a direct face to face with the Government, aimed at obtaining funds to

improve the functioning of the Centres but at the same time promoting a national health policy that considers the needs of the population and respects the fundamental rights of everyone.

In this respect, the first step is to gain a detailed knowledge of the qualitative and quantitative contribution of the Catholic Health System to the national one: for this reason, Caritas needs to improve its gathering, processing and analysis system concerning the information coming from the Health Centres. In fact, all the Health Centres have to fill in a monthly report concerning the activities carried out by the centre during the month. This report includes very important information, such as the number of consultations and hospitalisations, the number of births, the vaccinations given to expectant mothers and children, but also the movements of cash. At the end of each month the report is sent to the Ministry of Health, but the Catholic Health Centres usually send a copy of the report also to the Caritas National Office.

Being the data on paper, it is difficult to analyse them and come up with a prescription on objective choices in terms of national health policy. The computerisation of these data has been considered the best way to make them usable for strategic aims like:

- Verifying the importance of the sector, in terms of infrastructure and volume of services, in the Rwanda context.
- Recognising financial problems.
- Identifying some priority areas that need support and intervention.
- Organising an action of transparent, precise and effective advocacy.

In order to realise this, Caritas Rwanda asked the collaboration of AVSI, that undertook to prepare a specific program for the computerisation of the data and to start the insertion of the data concerning the 2001 year. At the end of the computerisation phase, AVSI elaborated an analysis of the Catholic Health Centre situation, comparable with the national statistics and analysis realised by the Ministry of Health.

The collaboration between AVSI and Caritas Rwanda still goes on because the computerisation phase has represented only the first step towards the aim of re-qualifying the services and the managing of the Catholic Health Centres.

#### **THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY**

The project that I supervised in Rwanda, and I have briefly presented here, refers directly to the principle of Subsidiarity: in fact, this is not only a pure technical criterion to establish the distribution of competencies, but a principle with a strong human significance, as clearly formulated in the Catholic Moral Doctrine.

Its origins are far off: many important and well-known philosophers like Aristotle, Tocqueville, Proudhon spoke about this concept, but the first direct reference to the principle of Subsidiarity is in the Seventh-Century works of Joannes Althusius, who based on it his construction of a federative system. According to the philosopher, the society – the complex of links and relations between the people – has been created by the nature; every community establishes a pact with the superior one in order to safeguard its autonomy

and consequently realise by itself the functions to which it has been appointed.

At the end of XIX century the Catholic Church recovered and reformed this doctrine, in order to overcome the big limits of the Nineteenth-Century State - unable to undertake a precise and balanced role in the society, and consequently swinging from a welfare and interventionist position, to an excessive liberal conception. Put it bluntly, the consequences of these extremes are far-reaching: in the first case, the State denies its citizens the freedom to program and operate in accordance with their wishes, creativity and inclinations; in the second case, the State declines all its responsibilities failing to fulfil also its functions of regulation and control.

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The Church understood the importance and urgency of the moment and took part to the discussion, suggesting its Christian vision of the society - a vision that is deeply rooted in a certainty of faith: God created man in his own image. For this reason, every human being has in itself some infinite potentialities that, if freely expressed, can lead man to the perfection. But man is unable to earn a living and to reach the intellectual and moral perfection by himself; he needs others. For this reason man is a social being by nature, inclined to establish numerous relations with the other human beings up to the creation of a organised and complex network of human relations: the society. But the society is not the mathematical sum of millions of individuals, because it is formed also by other smaller societies like the family, the firm, the State, the corporation and so on. After recognising the existence of intermediate

associations between State and citizens, it is necessary to establish which principle has to be adopted in order to regulate their mutual relations, above all the relations between the governmental authorities and the free initiative of the people.

For the Catholic Church the answer to this question is the principle of Subsidiarity, that determines the creation of a particular type of State. A State that has to be **essential**, with few functions, but implemented effectively, one that has to consider itself as an arbitrator, with the role of regulating rather than managing. State intervention has to take place as *ultima ratio* when the subjects and capabilities on the territory are unable to provide by themselves to the achievement of their aims. State has to consider itself at the service of the society with the chief function to give incentive to its citizens, so that they build their future autonomously, declaring at the same time a new culture of responsibility. Therefore, State is not a enemy of the society *a priori*; it becomes a danger for the society when it stops to be essential in the unrolling of its functions.

Advising the adoption of Subsidiarity, the Catholic Church tried to help Governments in their research of a point of balance. But this point is always different in time, because societies and their needs are in continuous evolution, which means that the lines of interference and no-interference change in accordance with the capability and the ability of social actors. For this reason, the principle of Subsidiarity is flexible, yielding either the slightest State intervention or the maximum one, according to circumstances.

The clear and complete formulation of this principle is in the

«Quadragesimo anno» Encyclical, written by the Pope Pius XI in 1931, to celebrate the Rerum Novarum 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But Pius XI had to face a completely different reality, even if equally worrying. In fact, during the years of his Pontificate, State takes the shape of a totalitarian force, that organises the life of people, attributes to itself every function and denies the creating, inventing, organising and operating autonomy of the social associations.

In the encyclical, the Pope denounces that, as history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now but by large associations. Yet, the most important principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, it is also an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do. For every social activity, by its very nature, ought to furnish help to the members of the social body, and never destroy and absorb them.

The supreme authority of the State, therefore, ought to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion

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requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations – in observance of the principle of “subsidiary function” – the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be, and the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State.

First and foremost, the State and every good citizen ought to look to and strive toward this end: that the conflict between the hostile classes be abolished and harmonious co-operation of the Industries and Professions be encouraged and promoted (*Quadragesimo anno*, n. 79, 80, 81).

Pius XI explains in a few words what the principle of subsidiarity means, what relation has to be between State and the different social organisations, which functions are the duty of the State and what field of action has to be acknowledged to the others. In a nutshell, the function of the State is supplementary with respect to the lower societal organisations, limited to support and aid them whenever they turn up incapable to fulfil their task, either for lack of resources or for incompetence.

#### THE AFRICAN POLITICAL REALITY

While the European States have started to inspire their policies and governmental actions to the principle of Subsidiarity, the African situation is very far from achieving this goal. The most part of African States goes on following an authoritarian-style politics – even if hidden behind the veil of democracy – that obstructs the carrying out of a real development.

The State – but it is more fair to speak about the political classes that

personify it – continues to consider itself as an absolute master and the only one entitled to operate in the society. So, citizens are deprived of any responsibility concerning their future and they become passive members of society. In order to solve this problem, it is not possible to put aside the State: in fact, at present the international dimension – in which States are the main actors – is getting more and more relevant; secondly, the State is indispensable for the creation of a free society capable of playing an active role on the global arena. Indeed, it is necessary to realise a democratisation process, that assure to the whole collectivity, and not only to the elite, the right to take part to the power.

For example the introduction of free elections is not a warrant of democracy, because elections are only an instrument. In order to democratise an election it is necessary to have a democratic people with inalienable rights, because the function of the elections is to guarantee their respect. Political development is an indispensable condition to achieve the total development of an African country, because it is not sufficient to think about development only in economic terms. Political development has to go with, and often precede, economic development.

To conclude, it is worth to keep in mind two important remarks: the first one is that, contrary to what some claim, there does not exist any African destine of poverty. The current dramatic situation of the largest part of the African continent is the consequence of mistakes committed in the past by local and foreign political classes. Even if much could be written on this topic, I think it would be wiser to study those mistakes, to learn how to avoid them in

the future. The second one is that we must deny the equation “development equals economic growth”, because it is not possible to consider the development of a country only in terms of GDP growth: this contextually calls for a wider concept of development, one that includes a social, moral and human-centred dimension.

At present many recognise that development is to assure an environment in which people can have a long, healthy and creative life (1<sup>st</sup> UNDP Report on Human Development) but it needs to cover a long way yet.

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