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الجمعية البرلمانية للبحر الأبيض المتوسط

The Dangers of “Social” NIMBY Syndromes in the context of Migration and “Environmental Refugees” phenomena.

Some of the NIMBY phenomena are usually related to the issue of immigration, and they materialize as popular demonstrations against migrants or protests over the location of reception centers. It is necessary to eliminate the root causes of these phenomena of intolerance and discrimination through participation and popular mobilization against those criminal organizations which make human trafficking a business. The disgruntlement of some towards immigrants should be directed against local criminal groups in order to change the dangerous mentality of intolerance towards “different” people. Consequently, it is vital to foster virtuous NIMBY syndromes based on the protest against the “true evil”, and thereby encourage the establishment of a climate of trust and solidarity, of openness of minds and a will for integration. This process should be encouraged by politicians, civil society and the media.

NIMBY, the acronym for “Not In My Back Yard”, is a phenomenon that would normally affect a community when an industrial plant (nuclear, chemical, etc.), considered to be objectionable or harmful, is located in a particular territory. This usually gives rise to a process of popular mobilization against the construction of the facility.

This syndrome particularly affects democratic states, as it is rooted in the very concept of democracy, especially for what concerns the themes of participation and local self-government.

An area where, at present, one can see at the greatest proliferation of the NIMBY syndrome is that of the environment. The location of dams, regasification plants, power plants, incinerators, etc., are typical examples of instances that encourage citizens to protest. It pushes them to mobilize to prevent the building of such structures that could cause damage to, amongst others, groundwater, air and agricultural products, thereby posing a health risk.

This forms the basis of the syndrome: it does not always arise from a pure ecological and environmentalist spirit, but rather from the need to defend one's territory and their life: "Not in my backyard...but in yours it is okay".

This phenomenon is, therefore, highly complex, with no easy solution for all actors involved.

In addition to these traditional forms, the syndrome has become increasingly associated with social-life and peaceful coexistence. The proliferation of the "social" NIMBY syndrome is therefore what we want to focus our attention on these pages.

Social instances of the NIMBY syndrome focus on the construction of structures that, while not hazardous to health, are considered to pose problems to the local community. Prisons, mental health care facilities, rehabilitation centers for drug addicts, nomad camps, reception centers for immigrants, etc, all fall into this category.

Despite the vast nature of the topic, it is necessary to focus on the key issue that we wish to deal with: that of migration and, "in nuce", of the emerging theme of "environmental refugees".

The official position of PAM is to reject any form of the NIMBY syndrome against immigration, as it is contrary to the principles of tolerance, respect and acceptance that the organization promotes.

Unfortunately, this is a phenomenon which is far from an immediate solution, and which strikes across different areas, at both the local and national level. Television networks continue to show frequent protests against reception centers and the presence of foreigners, especially in the countries of the Northern Mediterranean shore. This inability to relate to "others" forms the basis of discrimination and intolerance, yet it is a highly rooted phenomenon in many social contexts.

A new challenge, however, has emerged. Climate change is triggering dramatic phenomena, especially in the poorest regions, where coping mechanisms are inexistent and the level of resilience of populations exhausted. The most urgent issue arising is, at present, the scarcity of water resources for many populations.

"Water is life. If there is not enough we must move towards it". One of the major causes for migration in the future can be assumed to be a lack of water resources, while other migratory flows may result from soil erosion and increasing desertification.

After war there is peace, after a natural disaster there is reconstruction, but for the loss of water and degradation of land resources there is no solution, and there is no possibility of return for migrants escaping from the lack of water in their region. For this reason, the inclusion in the international agenda of the definition of “environmental refugees” is more pressing than ever, and PAM has already adopted a declaration on this relevant issue¹.

But even more urgent is the need to prepare, to the best of our abilities, to manage current and future flows of migration. It is imperative that any form of NIMBY syndrome leading to discriminatory values, such as popular protests against the establishment of reception centers in host countries, should be fought and controlled.

The fundamental goal is to give environmental migrants and refugees a concrete possibility of integration into the host community, going beyond their placement in temporary accommodation centers. It is necessary to remove those barriers that have been created in the host countries, starting with ghetto neighborhoods. More and more often in urban geography, cities are experiencing the agglomeration of immigrants in particular areas, or enclaves, within towns. This is a wall that should fall, as there will be no hope for social and cultural integration when there is physical separation.

The responsibility for this change must come from all parties involved. On the one hand, host governments must implement measures to prevent such physical separation, starting with building and supporting elements of community, social and cultural openness. On the other hand, the community of migrants itself must avoid “self-ghettoization” by participating actively in the social life of the host cities, and by opening up to the language and social customs. It is essential, however, that they hold on to/keep their cultural identity, and invite their host community to experience their way of life without imposing it upon them.

The concept of globalization can be extended and improved, and should not be reduced to a mere technological and economical fact. We can talk about "human globalization" as a great opportunity to bring together different cultures, and whose vehicle could be migration; a global movement in history that has never ceased to exist. This does not mean the creation of a senseless "melting-pot",

¹ **Report on Environment and Climate Change** - Rapporteur: Mrs. Elsa Papademetriou (Greece). Adopted at the 3rd PAM Plenary Session, 14 November 2008, Monaco.

http://www.apm.org.mt/documents/pdfs/Declaration_on_Environmental_Refugees.pdf

but rather a real and positive cultural exchange which is based primarily on the solidarity of the host population and also on the will of both sides, migrants and hosts, to gain knowledge of the historical wisdom and positive values of different cultures, while maintaining each their own identity.

This need to promote and develop dialogue is aimed at changing the mentality of localism and territorial protectionism that is so strong in many regions. This effort must start with the politicians, at both the local and national levels, who should respond forcefully to the negative traditional behaviors which are still solidly grounded. Politicians should bear the responsibility of being promoters of ideals of tolerance, acceptance and integration that have always characterized the Mediterranean civilizations, as well as passing on these values to the local population.

Politicians must assert the political authority necessary to address these challenges by promoting positive attitudes and by, above all, taking action. They can act by promoting positive NIMBY syndromes, and by mobilizing citizens against those who turn immigrants into a business, for example criminal organizations, instead of the immigrants themselves. Positive NIMBY syndromes of this kind are desirable, as they help to support the population and the politicians in their fight against the local criminals who exploit men, women and children, who most often end up entangled in the web of prostitution and the trafficking of drugs and weapons.

Politicians must dedicate their efforts to “educating” their constituencies rather than supporting or passively accepting intolerance and discrimination. They should work towards positive border cooperation between countries and promoting civic solidarity towards immigrants, as well as replacing the climate of insecurity with a situation of social trust, loyalty and cooperation at the local level.

At the same time, we must underline the strategic role that the media can play in this “project”. The media often tend to support popular protests and emphasize the issue, in order to increase circulation and audiences through the sensationalization of events. Another aspect is that more often than not, they tend to follow established political lines. They hardly ever go against the “status quo”, and mass-communication practices only fuel the issue. This practice is a factor that strongly contributes to the consolidation of the climate of tension and insecurity that runs through the local communities. The hope is that the media can contribute, away from the demagoguery of politics, to building “bridges” rather than “walls” between the host and migrant communities. Consequently, they can help to promote the ideals of mutual tolerance and respect.

PAM's role is that of a platform for discussion on these issues, which range from migration to integration. It serves as a forum for discussion, which is open to different voices and is ready to advise and cooperate with all stakeholders. PAM moves not only at the local level, through interaction with national governments, but also at the regional level, by collaborating with regional and international entities. It is from the regional level that it is hoped the drive towards the promotion of solutions will come. This organization has a key role to play in encouraging governments and local organizations to develop bottom-up policies aimed at raising awareness of diversity and involving the local community and migrants to acquire a consciousness of inter-cultural dialogue in order to overcome intolerance, prejudice and discrimination.