

The crisis makes the use of new indicators even more necessary

If one acknowledges that the current crisis is a combination of multidimensional phenomena, the most relevant indicators that could assist in getting out of the crisis must give at least as much weight to social and ecological aspects then to the economy and employment.

One could fear that the gravity of the current crisis and the rise in unemployment could lead some political leaders to fall back on the traditional solution – growth, regardless of any other considerations related to the course of development. Even to the point of one-off state interventions aiming to “save the banks”, to “save the automobile industry”, and so on, without really changing the global growth and development model, nor the banking, manufacturing and agricultural models.

Such means as a way out of the crisis would amount to self-deception and could even create more serious crises in the future. The current crisis is not merely due to faulty financial governance contaminating the real economy, it also has a social component and an ecological dimension. These crises form a system, and the democratic deficit amplifies them.

First of all, the social crisis. This crisis can also be explained by an increase in inequalities and job insecurity. Amongst the factors which set off the sub-prime crisis were the search for easy gains on investments and the disproportionately large assets of a small minority of people. Meanwhile, a growing number of poor or low-income households, with less secure jobs, were driven to take out risky mortgages, in the absence of social housing. On a more general level, malnutrition has recently increased worldwide in spite of global economic growth, while the number of millionaires also continues to increase.

Then there is the ecological crisis. The destabilizing changes in the prices of agricultural commodities and oil are due to short – and medium-term speculation, but are also the result of long-term trends, the growing scarcity of natural resources and the lower amount of arable land used for food. The fourfold crisis – climate, biodiversity, deforestation and water – is getting worse.

Environmental inequalities and social inequalities add up: 20% of the world’s population uses 80% of the planet’s natural resources. CO₂ emissions per capita in the United States are twelve times higher than what they should be to attain fair and sustainable worldwide levels. The most exposed populations will be and are already the first victims of damages to the environment. According to international bodies, 230 million people will be forced to migrate between now and 2050 as a result of global warming essentially caused by rich countries’ “growth at any cost”.

Under these circumstances, focusing on GDP and its growth rate is the surest way of going from crisis to crisis, with worsening effects. If the current crisis is indeed a combination of multidimensional and interdependent phenomena, the most relevant indicators that could assist in getting out of the crisis must give at least as much weight to the reduction of inequalities, social insecurity and pressure on the environment, as to the economy and to employment. Regarding employment, the issue should not boil down to the question “What growth in GDP do we need to create jobs?” but rather “what goals for sustainable well-being and social cohesion should be promoted and what decent and useful jobs are needed to achieve these goals?”. Moreover, most existing statistics that could shed light on social and environmental issues are calculated too late to be useful to drive policies. We call for an urgent investment by statistical institutions to enrich and to speed up the production of these data.

Currently, at least in certain regions of the world, the real risk is not a lack of goods and services. The risk is that the society we live in is becoming less livable because what we have considered thus far as evident framework values or free-of-charge resources – the environment, social links, etc. – have proved to be fragile and vulnerable to degradation and even extinction.

New indicators and new accounting systems must constitute an urgent priority in order to create a systemic response to the current crisis, which is itself systemic. These could be used as reference points in the development of new policies and as a basis for collective debate, the intensity of which would constitute one of the key elements in the vitality of societies.