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Autor: Müller, Jürg
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Ecopop – the two sides to the initiative

An immigration initiative will be put to the vote for the second time this year on 30 November. It is not just more radical than the initiative against mass immigration adopted in February, it also contains a highly controversial demand in relation to development policy.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

What has immigration to Switzerland – primarily from Europe – got to do with family planning in Africa? Very little to nothing in the view of some, but a great deal according to those behind the Ecopop initiative. Entitled “Stop overpopulation – safeguard our natural environment”, it adopts both an environmental and a global approach, calling for fewer people in Switzerland and worldwide. “The initiative is a small step towards a world able to function well economically with a stabilised and, over the long term, decreasing number of people,” remarks Ecopop Vice-President Sabine Wirth.

Ecopop makes two demands to achieve this objective: “Annual net immigration to Switzerland should be restricted to an average of 0.2% of the permanent resident population, and 10% of state development aid should be used to promote voluntary family planning” (see also articles in the 2/2013 and 3/2014 issues of “Swiss Review”). On the one hand, therefore, the initiative calls for much tighter immigration restrictions than the “initiative against mass immigration” of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), which was narrowly adopted by the Swiss people on 9 February 2014, because it provides for a rigid quota framework. On the other, it pursues population and development policy objectives.

Ecopop: “deteriorating quality of life”

Sabine Wirth justifies the call for rigorous restrictions on immigration by arguing that Switzerland has grown by

around 1.2% a year since the introduction of the full free movement of persons, with 80% being generated by immigration. “With such high population growth, all efforts to reduce per-capita consumption and increase the efficiency of technology are ineffective over the long term. Quality of life is declining along with the quality of the environment,” says Sabine Wirth, citing traffic congestion, increasing accommodation costs, urban sprawl and the extinction of species.

If immigration were reduced to 0.2%, this would equate to net immigration of around 16,000 people a year instead of the 80,000 to date. This would mean even less room for manoeuvre in negotiations with the EU than there is at present. The free movement of persons would not stand a chance anymore.

Opponents of the initiative: “misleading and damaging”

The initiative has been met with almost unanimous opposition in Parliament and from the political parties, including the SVP. During the National Council debate, SVP migration expert and National Councillor Heinz Brand remarked that this drastic initiative was not feasible for practical reasons. National Councillor Tiana Moser (Green Liberals) believes the popular initiative is “misleading and damaging”: damaging to the economy and misleading because no environmental problems would be resolved in this way; per-capita consumption is more important than the number of people.

It is not just the initiative’s immigration element that is proving con-

troversial; the same can be said of the demand for family planning measures in the developing world, which has received less attention in the public debate. During the debate in Parliament, Council of States member Paul Rechsteiner of the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) asked: “What would we say if another state stipulated population control measures for Switzerland in the form of family planning in its constitution?” He considers this an “alarming master race ideology”.

Ecopop touches a raw nerve

What is the situation beyond the political rhetoric? The fact that demographic development presents a global challenge is not in dispute. It is also evident that growth is taking place almost exclusively in less developed states. Ecopop Vice President Wirth says: “In countries like Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, women have six or seven children on average, the first usually as a young teenager. This makes escaping the poverty trap more difficult.” Voluntary family planning, namely sex education and free access to contraception, has been a UN human right since 1968 and is part of the Millennium Goals. “The UN is seeking to achieve several objectives through voluntary family planning – empowering women, accelerating economic development, improving the health and quality of life of those concerned, stabilising the political and social structures and, not least, helping ensure sustainable environmental quality.”

Ecopop touches a raw nerve here because rapid population growth in

very poor countries significantly impairs development prospects: food security is not ensured, the infrastructure is hopelessly overstretched, and the education and healthcare systems are under pressure. The salient point, however, is that population growth is a consequence of these failings. Poverty results in large numbers of children because children are welcome in such circumstances as extra workers and as carers during illness and old age, thereby helping to safeguard livelihoods.

Combating poverty is more effective

This is where criticism is levelled by development organisations. Alliance Sud, the Swiss Alliance of Development Organisations, maintains that “the decision to have lots of children is rarely voluntary but is instead the expression of economic constraints and a lack of rights. These are the issues that need to be tackled”. In other words: “Ecopop ignores the structural causes of population growth.” The development organisations are convinced that the key prerequisite for reducing birth rates in

Africa is strengthening the position of women. The education of women and girls means they do not have children too early. The reduction of infant mortality through improved healthcare provision also demonstrably results in smaller families. The same is true with employment opportunities.

The Federal Council takes a similar view, as it explains in its report on Switzerland’s commitment to promoting health and sex education in developing countries (30 May 2014): “A paradigm shift has taken place since the World Population Conference in Cairo in 1994. Previous programmes attempted to influence population dynamics in various countries primarily through government-prescribed family planning measures and by issuing contraception. This approach has proven either problematic or fairly ineffective. Instead, the main factors for positively influencing global population development include the effective and targeted combating of poverty, gender equality, and the education and empowerment of women. Within the framework of its international cooperation, Switzerland acts according

to this comprehensive perception and, in so doing, makes a contribution to the control of population dynamics.”

The Ecopop initiative therefore proposes methods that put the cart before the horse, have not proven effective or been well received in the Third World, or have even been counter-productive. The effective reduction of global environmental issues to population growth is also a problematic aspect of the Ecopop initiative. “It overlooks the huge differences in the consumption of resources,” notes Alliance Sud. “If you think the Ecopop initiative’s demand through to the end, you would have to target a radical reduction of the population in rich countries and of the wealthy elite in poor countries. It is not the number of people that is the decisive factor in environmental pollution but rather their consumption of resources.”

JÜRIG MÜLLER IS AN EDITOR WITH THE “SWISS REVIEW”

What does “overpopulation” mean?

The term “overpopulation” is ubiquitous in the demographic debate and also appears in the title of the Ecopop initiative. Yet, nobody can provide a precise definition of when a territory is overpopulated. Is Monaco overpopulated with a population density of 17,889 inhabitants per square kilometre? Or Germany with 226 and Switzerland with 198? In contrast, Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, has “just” 165 inhabitants per square kilometre. Overall, the African continent’s population density is actually below average – 36 people per square kilometre (south of the Sahara), compared with the global average of 53 people.



The group behind Ecopop is seeking to cut the birthrate in Africa with more funding for family planning