

Poverty and Environment

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Despite the linkage of poverty and environmental concerns at the level of macro policy and locally there is no consensus that the interests of the poor and of the environment are mutually compatible. Ambivalence about this relationship exists amongst those whose prime concern is environmental as well as amongst those most concerned with poverty eradication. Without international agreement on what should constitute the maximum and minimum levels of sustainable living standards it is difficult to see how this ambivalence can be resolved.

The environment is the source of what every one of us needs to survive – air, water and food; it is also the source of the materials we require to take our lives from pure survival to subsistence and beyond – shelter, clothing, tools and the infrastructure of collective human settlement. The absence or denial of these basic necessities constitutes absolute poverty. Unequal access to basic necessities and other environmental resources is the foundation of relative poverty. In addition to being excluded from access to basic resources, the poor are also most likely to be subjected to the degrading or polluting impacts of the consumption patterns of others. In industrial and post-industrial societies this may take the form of exposure to higher levels of toxicity in the air, water and earth. Where local sustainable patterns of agriculture are diverted to monoculture for the global market, the breaking of traditional fertility cycles is associated with negative changes in social structures and economic relationships. All of these are directly associated with worsening health profiles and earlier morbidity amongst the poorer populations.

Whilst the linkage between the social, economic, environmental and political dimensions of sustainable development is clearly acknowledged in

Agenda 21 and the need for poverty eradication is recognised, this is only rarely carried forward into integrated development programmes. The European Commission, for example, whilst promoting the production of National Action Plans for combating social exclusion and poverty and also promoting a European approach to sustainable development, does not seek for these to be integrated in any meaningful way. Global efforts through the United Nations to reduce or cancel the indebtedness of ‘developing’ countries and to increase levels of aid are a significant contribution towards addressing current imbalances but do not address the root causes of why these imbalances exist. These questions have been most positively addressed across the world through the Local Agenda 21 process but with a questionable impact on the major political and economic barriers to sustainable development.

Barriers also exist between those most concerned with these issues. Environmentalists are concerned that meeting the demands of poorer people for improved standards of living will contribute to increases in the unsustainable consumption that they are seeking to reverse. Poverty activists, both North and South, are concerned that universally

KEY CHALLENGES:

- **Models of truly sustainable development must take into account human rights, equality of opportunities and the equitable sharing and governance of global commons. Poorer people must play a central role in defining these models as well as planning and implementing them.**
- **Ever-increasing consumption is an obstacle to sustainable development. In order to be sustainable, consumption must be stabilised both by reducing over-consumption and by increasing under-consumption.**
- **Access to environment-friendly technology for the world's poor must be ensured and subsidised. The value of indigenous knowledge and technologies must be assessed, respected and utilised to benefit peoples and ecosystems.**
- **Poverty in the South and the North demands a common solution. Eradication of poverty in the South must be an integral part of North–South relations. The flow of financial resources from the South to the North must be reversed in favour of the poorest.**

applied demands for reduced energy consumption will serve only to further exclude the poor from the benefits that the wealthy have already achieved. Yet there are also many examples of good practice across the world – such as the promotion of localised food economies and improved domestic energy efficiency – that are simultaneously addressing poverty reduction and environmental degradation. There are lessons to be learnt and adapted for adoption and replication elsewhere, and a general need to monitor and evaluate how multilateral agreements and institutions relate to these initiatives.

Is poverty to blame for environmental degradation?

When people living in poverty are asked to identify their priorities, care for the environment or the need for sustainable development are rarely at the top of their lists. Housing, feeding and clothing the family, education for their children and care in their old age are much more significant concerns. Both production (or employment) and consumption patterns are determined more by these basic needs than by any consideration of their longer term impact. The poorest people are sometimes seen as complicit with those forms of economic activity in which the environmental costs of production are displaced onto the public purse or into the future.

This ignores the extent to which people living in poverty are able to exercise choice in their productive or purchasing behaviour and the degree to which this is determined by more powerful players in the local and global markets. Where employment is at a premium any work is an advantage whatever the potential risks it poses to the planet (or to oneself); where a family has to be fed, the most filling food and the cheapest protein will be preferred whatever its means of production; where geographical isolation or a lack of transport infrastructure is an issue, people will use vehicles which are energy inefficient to access employment and low prices.

This is not to suggest that people living in poverty are content with these choices or that they are unaware of the differences between their own lifestyles and those of others who are more advantaged. Whilst it is sometimes suggested that poorer people behave the way they do because they lack education or have lost basic skills, the evidence often shows that this is not the case. A major part of the experience of Local Agenda 21 and of more specific anti-poverty initiatives has been that the poorest people can be the most willing to explore and adopt new ideas and ways of organisation and work. This is particularly the case if, by taking the risks of innovation, they are not at the same time disenfranchised from the means of meeting their basic needs. It is an irony of the sustainable development process that energy efficiency programmes or collective, self help initiatives, such as food co-operatives (box schemes) and credit unions, which were initially

developed in response to the needs of poorer communities are increasingly being adopted by the more advantaged to enhance their own lifestyles.

Removing the barriers

Poorer people are attracted to more environmentally sustainable activities when they see that adopting them will enable them to improve their standards of living through the use of their own, self-directed, labour and through improved co-operation with other members of their community. For many, who have to make efficient use of whatever resources come to hand on a daily basis and who understand only too well the damage caused by money lenders, the idea of not mortgaging the future for today's consumption seems no more than common sense.

But there are real barriers to making this common sense a reality. By definition, poorer people lack capital in the form of land or investments and are excluded from many financial services; patterns of settlement, travel to work and the changing demographics of family and social life can make collective endeavour more difficult; systems of welfare and taxation, through the operation of 'poverty traps' can penalise initiative and undermine prospects for longer term success. Each of these barriers is capable of being addressed. However, to do so requires significant changes to be made in the current distribution of resources and power, including gender relations in households and in the wider economy. The challenge to the promoters of sustainable development is whether or not they are prepared to take on board the vested interests that sustain the inequitable and unsustainable status quo. ●