

## ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION – COMBATING THE MENACE OF HUNGER AND POVERTY

Environmental experts are in the opinion that, unless we change many of our lifestyle patterns, the world will face unacceptable levels of environmental damage and human suffering. There is urgent need for tailoring the pace and the pattern of global economic growth to the planet's carrying capacity. In fact, human beings have the ability to make development sustainable and to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.



The environmental crisis affects everyone on the planet, but the degree to which the inhabitants of different parts of the world contribute to this crisis depends on the level of their economic development and their consumption patterns. As much as 70% of the world's consumption of fossil fuel and 85% of chemical products is attributable to 25% of the world's population. Water consumption is also unevenly distributed. The consumption patterns for forest products and many other commodities have the same direct inverse proportion to the size of population of the top 20% of the richest societies. This profligate demand puts excessive pressure on both national and global natural resources. The rest of the world, comprising 80% of its population with a share of less than 20% of global income, has a far more modest consumption level.

While international environmental concerns are often expressed in broad terms such as desertification or climatic change, the environmental problems of concern to vulnerable groups in marginal areas are generally quite localized in nature, revolving around immediate issues, such as the degradation of a particular rangeland or soil erosion on farmland or the progressive shortening of fallow. These affect the poor because they are directly related to household food security. Degradation of the resource base generally translates into decreases in production or income and thus in the availability of food. Declining soil fertility leads to lower crop yields while rangeland depletion reduces offtake, and any deterioration in water quality adversely affects the fish catch. Degradation of common property resources pulls labour away from directly productive activities towards gathering – simply collecting non-wood and minor forest products – and probably diminishes opportunities for deriving income from this source. In addition, recurrent drought or natural calamities also directly result in progressive loss of food security prospects.

Absolute poverty has been on the retreat in most high-potential areas in developing countries. The combination of more productive technologies, fertile land and water, and high levels of development and public investment have raised incomes significantly for people living in these areas. While this development has not always been equitable – or sustainable, the most important disparities are not between rich and poor people within high-potential areas, but rather between high-potential high-investment areas and fragile ecosystems. In the latter areas, politically marginal indigenous populations have been neglected. While the challenge for poverty alleviation in high-potential areas remains considerable, the prognosis is not grim provided agricultural intensification proceeds without environmental destruction.

The need for urgent action can be recognized in relation to the following characteristics of these regions:

(a) They constitute a significant part of the world's land resources. Forty percent of the earth's land surface is considered dryland, of which approximately 70% is already degraded or subject to heavy degradation. On the other hand, hilly and mountainous regions cover about 21% of the earth land mass and, although not so extensive as dry lands, they exert a far-reaching influence on other areas, primarily through watershed functions.

(b) The role of both ecosystems in terms of human habitat is also significant. About 10% of the world population live in mountain areas, where as, a much larger percentage (about 40%) occupies the watersheds below. It is safe to assume that the future of mountain ecosystems affects the life of half of the world's population. From the Andes to the Himalayas, and from South East Asia to East and Central Africa a serious ecological deterioration caused by overgrazing, deforestation and excessive cultivation threatens the livelihood of these populations.

(c) Mountains are important sources of water, energy, minerals, agricultural products and a major reserve for the world's biodiversity. Similarly, dry zones are rich in biodiversity, hosting many endangered species. Moreover, crops, grasses, trees, and livestock species, that form the core of survival in drought prone regions, exist in these regions only.

(d) A high proportion of the absolute poor in ecologically fragile areas are indigenous people. They depend on renewable resources to maintain their well-being. This has led to the development of livelihood systems which are well-adapted to the harsh conditions in which they lived. However, their traditional ways of life are now being threatened, disturbing the delicate balance of natural resource use.

(e) Rural women play a key role in on- and off-farm activities in the developing countries. With the growing male out-migration from marginal areas, the number of women headed households in these

areas is increasing. Women are becoming more and more responsible for the day to day survival of the family. Women tend to be more vulnerable than men to the effects of environmental degradation because they are often involved in harvesting common property resources such as wood and water.

(f) Degradation of land and loss of its vegetative cover also have consequences at the global level, primarily because of its influence on carbon exchange, but also in terms of loss of biodiversity.

Action towards combating the menace – Over the past two decades, environmental degradation, including land degradation has continued to worsen exacerbating further poverty and food insecurity. Conversely, awareness of the importance of the environment and its conservation has increased. There has been a transformation in people's perception of the poverty problem in developing countries.

Increasingly, rural people are realizing that:

(a) the fragile environment on which they depend for their survival is being neglected or over- exploited, and it is now necessary to rehabilitate it and manage it sustainably; and

(b) the environment belongs primarily to them, and they must take the responsibility for the land and organize themselves in groups, cooperatives, village development associations and other local association to defend it.

Effective actions against poverty, household food insecurity, and environmental degradation in marginal areas require first and foremost the empowering and equipping of local communities to take up the reins of resource management. The importance of local area development and improved local governance must be emphasized. An important factor in this context, of course, is the issue of incentive frameworks and enabling environments, with specific regard to the question of how to combine longer-term concerns for environmental rehabilitation and conservation with the pressing short-term needs of household food security.

Source : <http://saferenvironment.wordpress.com/2008/08/14/environmental-degradation-combating-the-menace-of-hunger-and-poverty/>