



“Summary of article by F.E. Trainer: Environmental Significance of Development Theory” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 46-48

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While conventional development has been successful in raising growth rates, the primary beneficiaries of growth are those who are already rich. The vast majority of people in the Third World have experienced very little improvement in their real material living standards. However, both conventional and radical (Marxist and dependency) development theories have ignored the voluminous "limits to growth" literature. These schools are premised on the notion that the goal of development is endless economic growth and the achievement for all of the living standards typical of the rich countries. Given present estimates of the world's mineral and energy resources, there is no chance that all of the people in the world can have per capita use rates typical of people in rich countries. At present, the rich countries of the world have 1/5 of the world's population, but consume 4/5 of the world's annual resource output.

There is increasing recognition that problems of resource depletion, destruction of the environment, deprivation of Third World people, conflicts over resources and markets, and a falling quality of life are all a consequence of pursuing a single minded policy of growth, and ignoring the problem of the "limits to growth." Rich countries must, therefore, move towards becoming less affluent, more self sufficient, conserver societies. In addition, the goal of development must cease to be defined in terms of raising everyone to the "living standards" or the patterns of settlement and industrialization that the rich countries now have, as this will be physically impossible.

Two main reasons why development has done little or nothing for the poorest 40%-60% in the Third World are the emphasis on market forces and the inappropriate development that results. The reason that 1/5 of the world's people consume 4/5 of the world's resources is that the global economy is based on the market system. Market forces always deliver scarce and valuable things to the relatively rich, while ignoring the poor. It is these same market forces that ensure that the wrong industries are set up in the Third World, with the result that much of the productive capacity created is inappropriate in view of the needs of most Third World people.

Development, when focused on economic growth or increases in GNP, allocates resources to producing for the relatively rich, especially for those abroad. Development aimed instead at meeting the needs of most people may not yield substantial increases in GNP. Since the 1970s, the inability of growth alone to meet the needs of the poor has led to "growth with equity" and "basic needs" strategies. But these theories still fundamentally rely on growth as a solution. They mistake the cause of the problem - growth - for the solution. The thrust of development should therefore not be towards increasing GNP, but towards improving the quality of life. A strategy of appropriate development would contribute to better informal security networks, more

independent and autonomous village government, and to the development of rich and varied forests and "edible landscapes." Development should not only be for the economy, but for the society as a whole.

The "indiscriminate growth and trickle-down someday" approach to development is largely responsible for the damage occurring to the planet's ecosystem. This conventional approach to development advocates importing huge quantities of goods, machinery and inputs from rich countries. In order to pay for these imports, Third World countries are forced to turn to their natural resources, which are the most readily available export items. In addition to forests being destroyed outright for export purposes, the lack of appropriate development options lead nomads, peasants and native peoples to exploit remaining forests as well. Forests are cleared for replacement with agricultural activities that have high rates of return, such as export beef production. This destruction leads to less rainfall retention, creeks drying up, soil being washed away, severe droughts and floods. The expansion of export cropping has resulted in the best lands going towards export crops, driving peasants and nomads towards marginal lands that are prone to overgrazing and erosion. This has resulted in an increase in the number of landless people in rural areas, and large scale migration to already overcrowded urban areas. Along with the destruction of forests, the use of pesticides and fertilizers and the accompanying irrigation changes have led to the loss of a number of plant and animal species and genetic diversity.

Other environmental consequences result from the affinity of the conventional development approach for big infrastructure development. For example, the development of dams results in the destruction of forests, displacement of native peoples, loss of silt, and the destruction of food chains such as fisheries. These large scale infrastructure projects take away resources from more appropriate development strategies and add to foreign debt.

The following can be suggested as basic principles for appropriate, ecologically sustainable Third World development:

- 1) **Focus on the Concept of Appropriateness:** Concentrate on developing the overall quality of life, with a view toward considerations of ecology, resources and justice, rather than focusing on growth, market forces and the profit motive.
- 2) **Totally Abandon Western Affluence as a Goal of Development:** Aim for lower (but still comfortable), stable lifestyles with reasonable levels of nonrenewable resource consumption, rather than an endless increase of material wealth.
- 3) **Maximize Local Economic Self Sufficiency:** Aim at self sufficiency and independence from the global economy via the development of integrated, small scale regional economies.

The above prescriptions, based on self sufficiency and autarchy, are often dismissed as naive. This is true if the objective of development is heavy industrialization, high levels of GNP, and western lifestyles. However, if the goals of development are seen in an alternative framework in which low levels of consumption of resources can achieve satisfactory living standards and a high quality of life, then frugality, self sufficiency and stability come into focus.