



“Summary of article by Martin W. Lewis: Third World Development and Population” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 314-317

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Economic development and population growth are of essential concern to environmentalists. In those areas of the Third World where countries are experiencing rapid industrial expansion, there is evidence that air- and water-borne toxins are being generated at enormous rates, and that they are being disposed of far more carelessly than in the North. Meanwhile, in the least developed countries, population growth is exerting dangerous pressure on the carrying capacity of the ecosystems and producing widespread desertification and deforestation. In both cases the ecological problems are severe. There is a crucial paradox in that the very development deemed necessary to alleviate misery and poverty in the Third World by elevating consumption levels to those enjoyed in the North simultaneously has appalling ecological consequences. As a result, radical greens argue that the pattern of development in the South today must be quite different from that which occurred in the First World.

FOR AND AGAINST DEVELOPMENT

The most extreme eco-radicals casually dismiss the very concept of development as one that constitutes an enormous threat to the environment and to society at large. The majority of eco-radicals, however, realize that a return to tribal subsistence is impossible. Moreover, much overgrazing and deforestation occurs precisely because so many in the Third World are so poor. The most common eco-radical position is therefore that Third World environments can only be preserved if poverty is alleviated through particular kinds of development initiatives. The challenge, then, is to develop environmentally benign methods of improving living standards, i.e., to pursue the path of eco-development.

The tenets of eco-development follow directly from the propositions of deep ecology: development should be based on small scale projects, administered locally, and governed through participatory democracy. Communities would be better off in every sense if they simply bypass modern industrialization, focusing instead on local crafts and manufacturing using locally appropriate technology. Production should be for subsistence rather than for global exchange, and it should be aimed at achieving bioregional self-sufficiency and severing links with the global economy.

The eco-development approach has roots in dependency theory. It is based in part on the idea that the development of the North was a direct product of the colonial imperialist exploitation of the Third World, a process that simultaneously underdeveloped these colonized areas. The economies of the First and Third Worlds are therefore systemically linked in such a way that the ongoing prosperity of one is structurally dependent upon the impoverishment of the other. From

this perspective, the industrialized economies are doubly objectionable, as they are based upon both the rapacious and unsustainable consumption of natural resources, and upon the unconscionable exploitation of the land and peoples of the Third World. Development in the Third World along these traditional lines is therefore impossible. Investments in agricultural and industrial schemes will fail to generate a take-off into independent development even as they strain the environment.

Different perspectives on population growth also divide environmentalists into several camps. To many, it is the most troubling problem. Every gain in pollution control or habitat protection may be outweighed by the effects of population growth, and the earth is in danger of being suffused in a Malthusian nightmare. Writers who share this view tend to freely advocate relatively coercive population control measures as the solution, although radical greens of a more leftist bent tend to discount these sorts of arguments. However, the focus on population as the source of poverty and environmental degradation obscures the true underlying systemic causes; the real culprits are market production, Northern exploitation of the South, and overconsumption by the North.

FROM ECO-DEVELOPMENT TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Though many ecologists continue to cling to the views discussed above, they have increasingly come to question the feasibility or desirability of the eco-development approach. They recognize that such severe tactics will neither produce genuine development nor be politically feasible. The approach promotes unrealistic eco-panaceas amidst the very real and immediate grinding poverty of billions in the Third World. Moreover the single-minded, anti-industrial focus on small scale development will not necessarily ease environmental pressures.

The concept of sustainable development has therefore emerged as a means to unite the concerns of both ecologists and Third World developers. The basic premise of sustainable development is that economic growth must never undercut the productivity of the natural ecosystem. From this perspective, rapid economic growth is possible provided it is accompanied by a rapid reduction of energy and raw material inputs per unit of production.

Most writings by sustainable development advocates tend to focus on rural problems and small-scale programs targeted at the needs of rural peasants. As a consequence, crucial urban issues have been systematically neglected. This neglect arises from the mistaken impression that cities can only be treated as part of the problem, because they are seen as both uninhabitable hells for those that must reside in them, and as threats to the environment due to the wastes of millions of people and numerous industries that befoul their air and water. Ironically this view ignores one central environmental benefit of cities, especially given the critical population pressures that confront many Third World countries: urbanization can ease land pressures in the countryside, thus reducing rates of deforestation and desertification while helping to preserve habitats and biodiversity. This is not to say that urban environments are not appalling and dangerous in many developing nations, but these problems are not insuperable; the city of London was once an environmental disaster, but development and planning have rendered it a pleasant urban habitat. Urban problems may result more from underdevelopment than from over-urbanization per se.

Once it is acknowledged that cities have their place, then industrialization must be given its due as well. The anti-industrial bias of many eco-radicals is a legacy of the earlier dependency theory perspective. However, they have clung to the early simplistic arguments of dependency theory, evidently unaware that substantial revision and reformulation of ideas has occurred even within that school. There is now a more broad-ranging discussion and debate about issues of development and progress. While exploitative relations between the North and South undoubtedly exist, it is now recognized that the dependency model, particularly in its simplest version, fails to describe reality. The emergence of the NICs testifies to the possibility of industrial development in the Third World and the fact that this development can alleviate poverty. Industrial development is therefore a necessary part of the transformation process. This is not, however, to minimize the environmental problems of industrial production. Both industrialized and industrializing nations confront monumental problems of resource use and waste generation. One of the tasks of sustainable development, then, must be to address these legitimate concerns.

While population growth clearly does not threaten us with the immediate Malthusian catastrophe envisioned by many, it remains a serious problem. A rapidly growing population clearly poses staggering strains on any economy. With population growth rates approaching 3-4% in many developing countries, economic growth must also achieve at least this pace just to maintain current standards of living. The infrastructure and educational needs of a burgeoning population can exceed the capacity of a developing economy to service them. Population stabilization is also essential to maintain biotic diversity. Population control therefore remains a crucial part of sustainable development programs, but population growth is not the primary cause of today's problems. Pollution and resource depletion are still primarily attributable to the wealthy societies, not to developing countries, even with their high birth rates.

Most radical greens are on shaky ground when they enter the Third World. They desperately desire to solve the devastating problems of poverty in the Third World, yet they advocate programs and policies that preclude genuine development.