

# Our Endangered Environment

The following three pages were written in 1993 – has anything changed in the last 30 years.

Use the internet to update some of the data and see if the situation has worsened.

## SAVE THE PLANET BY SAVING ITS PEOPLE



### *People, Environment & Poverty*

"Environmental destruction and mass poverty are arguably the most important issues of our time....." Maurice Strong, Secretary General, Earth Summit.

How can planet Earth be saved from ecological catastrophe? How can more than a quarter of the world's population be liberated from hunger and dire poverty?

There can be no separate solutions to these questions - any answers must integrate environmental protection with meeting the desperate needs of the poor. So argues Ben Jackson, campaigns officer for the World Development Movement (WDM) in his latest book, "Poverty and the Planet: A question of survival".

It is mainly the poor who are destroying the environment but they are not doing so out of ignorance, rather from desperate necessity. In their daily struggle to survive, impoverished farmers and villagers are driven to over-exploit the soil, the forests and pastures.

They are driven by a *logic of survival* that is, in turn, dictated by the logic of destruction which is not of their making. They are largely the victims of development policies and the forces of international markets beyond their influence.

The *logic of destruction* is one of top-down development that leaves those at the bottom of the economic heap helpless victims of the whims of the international commodity markets.

Those involved in campaigning for development and the environment are rapidly coming to see how all these issues are interlinked. For example, the fate of Amazon rainforests is inextricably linked with the conditions attached to Brazil's foreign debt and the decisions taken by Northern bankers. The future of fruit farmers in the Caribbean can rest on a single trade agreement with Europe or the United States.

Campaigners are now forming alliances based on the linkages of environment and development. Tracing the chains of cause and effect between rapid, blind industrial growth and its concomitant global threats of pollution of air, earth and water, destruction of the ozone layer, the emission of greenhouse gases and deforestation, are complex. The hunt for solutions that are based on the needs of the poor rather than the needs of international investment are essential.

This is a controversial viewpoint for it questions quantitative measures of development such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person and instead argues for qualitative measures to be taken into account (i.e. the distribution of wealth, the cost of economic progress to the environment, etc). From 1992 the UN Development programme will begin to use its own *Human Development Index* (HDI) - making allowances for population growth, education and life expectancy rates.

For the poor of the world to be freed from the logic of destruction they must be able to meet their short-term needs in the knowledge of long-term security. Without this they will continue to be driven to exhaust the natural resources that are available to them simply so they can eat.

The ultimate priority of both environmental and development policies must be to provide a livelihood for the poor and future generations rather than concentrating solely on economic growth or protecting the rainforests. This is what is meant by sustainable development, a concept implying neither "more growth" nor "no-growth", but rather human growth and development and responsible long-sighted management of the environment.

Environmentalism is no longer a luxury unaffordable in the North. It is crucial to the logic of survival and the prospects for the planet and its people.

*Gemini News*



# DOOMED PLANET (2)

Fig.3



The great debate concerned with increasing development in the South has reached an impasse at present. If a government of a developing country fiercely curbs its population growth and enables its people to have a higher standard of living - more consumer goods linked with industrial development - then it is likely to increase rather than reduce its country's pollution output. And yet many demographers still consider that human numbers are the most important factor in increasing pollution. In fact some equate large population figures with large environmental hazards, implying that one causes the other. But many others think that it is time to consider the impact of increasing technology and consumption on population and environmental pollution.

However many strategies for saving the doomed planet are based on **IPAT**. But if we insist on solving our growing environmental problems through reducing population factors then logically we should begin by lowering the population of the North.

An average child in the North consumes 20 times as much and pollutes 10 times as much as a child from the South. Perhaps we in the North should consider more carefully and intelligently reducing our super-luxury level consumption and pollution before preaching population reduction to the people of the South. The Northern nations have enough extra to make painless cuts. One rough estimate of our extra wealth can be gauged from the following statement

...."The energy wasted in the US today costs more than the entire \$9,000 a second military budget!"

Perhaps the South can learn from the dirty technology problems of the North and go for sustainable development strategies incorporating clean technology linked to sensible population policies. The North in turn could help this progressive view of development and thereby environmental protection through adopting a positive stance on the debt crisis facing many of the nations of the South and help maintain soils and forests of the South (Fig.3).

Experts have developed a number of equations for examining the impact of people on the environment. The most common one is IPAT, i.e..

$$I = P \times A \times T$$

where **I** stands for the impact on the environment, **P** stands for Population. This is multiplied by **A** - the level of Affluence (wealth). It is multiplied again by **T** - the level of Technology available.

In other words, the environmental impact can be increased by multiplying any of these factors: Population, Affluence or Technology. Northern demographers often emphasise the Population factor and downplay the influence of Affluence and Technology.

IPAT also ignores the unequal global economic system.

## Assignment

1. Write definitions of each of the following terms: consumption, pollution, North, South, demography
2. What are the following organisations and what do they do? **OECD, UNEP**
3. Select **one** of the following statements and write a justification for it:  
**a.** Population is the main cause of environmental problems. Population control is vital for the future  
**b.** Improving technology threatens the environment  
**c.** The level of affluence remains a major threat to the environment across the planet.
4. Debate the statements above in class or groups.