

**Australian Development Studies Network  
Australian National University  
GPO Box 4  
Canberra ACT 2601**

**The Greening of Development Theory**  
**Good news or bad news for the poor in the Third World?**

*Michael Burgess*

**Briefing Paper No. 17  
October 1990**

---

# **The Greening of Development Theory**

## **Good news or bad news for the poor in the Third World?**

---

*The present concern for the environment presents an important opportunity with which to pressurise governments and international organisations into making a greater effort to alleviate poverty in the developing world. However, the poor analysis of many environmentalists could actually result in them supporting policies that discriminate against the poor. This paper is concerned with the way in which such poor analysis could reinforce a number of questionable ideas held by others in the development field, such as the belief that a major cause of poverty and environmental destruction in the Third World is an increase in cash cropping. The paper also critically examines the often superficial analysis made by critics of the IMF and World Bank.*

### **The author**

Michael Burgess is currently completing his PhD within the Institute for Science and Technology Policy (ISTP) at Murdoch University, Western Australia. His research topic is *Social forestry in India: a case study in policy making for sustainable development*. Michael is also an active member of Community Aid Abroad.

The ISTP was established in 1987 and carries out policy-related research in the areas of industrial innovation strategies, sustainable development, energy policy, and science and technology policy. The Institute also offers a two-year MA by coursework in science and technology policy.

### **Introduction**

The present phenomenal increase of concern with the environment presents an important opportunity with which to pressurise governments and international organisations into giving a higher priority to the alleviation of poverty in developing countries. This is because, as the Bruntland Report (WCED, 1987) points out, there can be no lasting solution to the world's environmental problems without addressing the problems faced by developing countries. Since the extensive environmental deterioration taking place in these countries is the result of a variety of factors, such as poverty, population pressures and political and economic injustice, it is impossible to address the issue of the environment without addressing these other issues as well.

Theoretically at least, environmentalists and those concerned with the alleviation of poverty in the developing world, such as non-government aid organisations (NGOs), have a strong communality of interest, and the time would seem opportune for them to work more closely together to push governments and international organisations into introducing policies which would benefit both the poor and the environment. Certainly, NGOs could greatly benefit from the ability of environmentalists to generate publicity and gain public support for the issues in which they are involved. However, despite the great potential of environmentalists to make an important input into the development debate, there are a number of problems which could limit their effectiveness.

The first problem is that the alleviation of poverty and injustice in developing countries simply does not rate very highly among the priorities of most First World environmentalists. That, however, is not the subject of this paper, which focuses on the perspectives of those environmentalists who do address the problems of the developing world, but whose analysis is often badly flawed. Not only does this limit their ability to intervene in the development debate, but it could also mean that when they do succeed in doing so, their intervention could produce negative consequences. For example, environmentalists might oppose development projects which offer a number of potential benefits for the poor. Their lobbying might also encourage governments and international organisations to transfer development funds away from poverty alleviation and other programs that attempt to rectify the root causes of environmental destruction, into more symptomatic approaches to the protection of the environment, such as dune-fixing projects to halt the advancement of the desert. Of particular concern is the way in which some of the more questionable beliefs of environmentalists could reinforce the more questionable beliefs of others concerned with the Third World. This paper examines a number of these beliefs.

### **Cash crops v food crops**

Many critics of the type of development pursued in the Third World have been strongly influenced by the 'Food First' school of thought, which argues that one of the main reasons that people in Third World countries do not have enough to eat is that they have been replacing traditional food crops with cash crops (George, 1977; Lappe and Collins, 1977). It is surprising, given the lack of evidence to support this view, that it has become so enshrined in the dogma of many on the left, particularly members of the more progressive NGOs such as Community Aid Abroad. A study by Van Braun and Kennedy which examined 78 developing countries over the period 1968-82, showed that only six of the countries which expanded the share of land used for cash cropping experienced a decline in per capita food production. The countries that suffered declines in food production also tended to suffer declines in cash crop production (Barbier, 1989). One explanation for this is that those countries that have the best extension, marketing and input servicing systems are able to reap the rewards in both the food and cash crop areas (Streeten, 1987, 53).

The negative view of cash crops is reinforced by environmentalists who argue that cash crops are far more environmentally destructive than the food crops they replace. Edward Barbier (1989) is critical of this perspective, and points out that while some cash crops are more environmentally destructive than food crops, some others are a lot less so. For example, oil palms, coffee and cocoa, if they have grassland as ground cover, display a rate of soil erosion (on erodible soils) 2 or 3 times less than staple food crops such as maize, sorghum, millet, cassava and yams.

The issue at stake, he argues, is proper agricultural management, such as planting the right crops in the right place.

### **Technology and development**

A major error made by many environmentalists when judging the effect of the type of development taking place in the Third World, is to focus on the scale of technology being used. Environmental destruction and poverty are largely seen as a result of the reliance on large scale technologies. As an alternative to this type of development, they favour a policy of widespread small-scale 'appropriate technologies'. It is undoubtedly the case that there are many circumstances when such technologies are or could be more appropriate than large scale ones. However, the belief by appropriate technology supporters that progressive social change can be brought about by technological innovation is extremely naive. When introduced into an unequal or exploitative social situation, technologies, large scale or small, will often simply reinforce the existing structures.

The following discussion on the choice of options available for fertiliser production in India emphasises this point. In contrast to the highly capital-intensive nature of conventional fertiliser production, supporters of appropriate technologies have argued for the implementation of family or village based gobar-gas plants. These plants use cow dung and produce both fertiliser and methane gas. In reality, however, the introduction of these plants was not a great success. Even with government subsidies, the capital costs of the plant proved beyond the reach of small farmers, with the result that the technology was used mainly by the richer farmers, with the result that its introduction exacerbated existing rural inequalities (Disney, 1977).

In regard to the capital-intensive methods of producing fertiliser, it is important to recognise that there are a number of alternatives available. For example, maximising output growth by using more cost effective conventional technology may cause food prices to fall. Disney (1977) argues that the government could purchase part of the grain output, distribute it to the unemployed, and prop up food prices at the same time. An alternative policy to this, he suggests, is that the government could put a levy on fertiliser prices and this money could be used to promote labour-intensive activities for the poor, such as road repair work. These and other alternative possibilities show that critics are premature to dismiss large-scale capital-intensive technologies because of their history, before considering how they might operate in different conditions.

### **World Bank/IMF**

International organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF have come in for a great deal of criticism from environmentalists and other social activists<sup>1</sup>. While much of this is justified, a great deal of it is based on simplistic analysis. The IMF, for example, has been criticised over the effects of its Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), an emphasis of which is to cut public spending. As a result, health and education programs are often drastically reduced. However, it is important to recognise that in developing countries public spending tends to bring far greater benefit to the relatively affluent than to the poor. Not only does it provide them with jobs, but they also tend to receive a far greater share of the subsidised services provided (*Economist*, 1989, Supplement; Sender and Smith, 1984, 2-3).

Many criticisms of SAPs by those in the development field stem from their naive adherence to the discredited dependency perspective on Third World development, which argues that the problems of Third World countries are the result of their exploitation by the rich countries. While this type of exploitation obviously exists, the evidence suggests that (especially in large countries such as India) it is internal factors which are primarily the cause (Sender and Smith, 1984; and *Economist*, 1989, Supplement). Not least is the cost to these countries of running their huge, inefficient and often corrupt bureaucracies. Rather than arguing against SAPs, critics of World Bank and IMF policies should be pushing for them to be modified so that the burden of adjustment does not fall primarily on the poor. It should be noted that this burden would not be so great if dependency theorists in the past had not encouraged Third World leaders to avoid their responsibilities by conveniently putting most of the blame for their problems on external factors.

### **Other issues**

Many environmentalists such as those connected with the Centre for Science and the Environment (CSE) in New Delhi have done much to stress the links between environmental destruction and poverty (CSE, 1985). However, the recognition of such links does not justify the belief of some environmentalists that the conservation of nature is of primary importance and the starting point of any analysis, and that the only acceptable criterion for judgement is the virtual absence of environmental destruction. It is a fact that rich countries have become rich by exploiting their environments and some degree of destruction is a necessary price for development. Furthermore, it is extremely simplistic of environmentalists to assume that development only destroys the environment and cannot improve it.

In a Third World country such as India, which has approximately half of its land designated as wasteland, it is important that environmentalists continue to argue that increased productivity and employment will result from a concerted program of rehabilitation (CSE, 1986; Bentley, 1984): it is undoubtedly the case that money spent in these areas will often produce better results than money spent on some of the more grandiose and highly questionable development schemes that developing countries have chosen. However, this form of reasoning, and the desire to conserve or rehabilitate the environment, should not blind us to the fact that there are other options available which would also benefit the poor, and which at times might be a more productive use of any money available than the more overtly environmental-sounding projects just mentioned.

### **Conclusion.**

In conclusion, it is quite surprising that many of the views mentioned above have become so enshrined in dogma, given the lack of evidence to support such perspectives. If we are to take advantage of the current opportunities to place the problems of Third World poverty and environmental destruction more firmly on the agenda of governments and international organisations, then a more critical approach to the issues will have to be taken.

## Notes

1. See for example Teresa Hayter (1985), and Cheryl Payer (1982), as well as various editions of the *Ecologist*.

## References.

Barbier, E. B., 1989. 'Cash Crops, Food Crops, and Sustainability: The Case of Indonesia', *World Development*, 17(6), 879-895.

Bentley, W. R., 1984. 'The Uncultivated Half of India: Problems and Possible Solutions', *Discussion Paper*, No. 12, Ford Foundation, New Delhi.

Centre for Science and the Environment, 1985. *The State of India's Environment 1984-85*, CSE, New Delhi.

Centre for Science and the Environment, 1986. *Developing India's Wasted Lands*, CSE, New Delhi.

Disney, R., 1977. 'Economics of "Gobar-Gas" versus Fertiliser: a Critique of Intermediate Technology', *Development and Change*, 8, 77-102.

*The Economist*, 1989. 'A Survey of the Third World, Supplement', 23-29 Sept., 1989, 1-58.

George, S., 1977. *How the Other Half Dies*, Allanheld, Osmun & Co., Montclair, New Jersey.

Hayter, T., 1985. *Aid: Rhetoric and Reality*, Pluto Press, Sydney.

Lappe, F. M. and Collins, J., 1979. *Food First*, Ballantine, New York.

Payer, C., 1982. *The World Bank*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

Sender, J., and Smith, S., 1984. 'What's Right With the Berg Report and What's Left of its Critics?' *Discussion Paper*, No.192, IDS, Sussex University.

Streeten, P., 1987. *What Price Food?* Macmillan, London.

World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.