

ECOLOGICAL POVERTY



There are over 1 billion poor people in the world, and this number is growing by the day. International institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), currently use economic initiatives to curb poverty, but these initiatives are not working. In some cases, they are actually making poverty worse.

Why are the poor getting poorer?

The poor are suffering the negative effects of the richest peoples' consumption habits. A mere 30 percent of the world's population consumes 70 percent of the world's resources. This unequal rate of consumption means that the poor have access to less and less resources for their daily needs.

- The poor have an *intensive consumption pattern*. They rely upon their immediate surroundings for survival. Their food, shelter, and fuel all come from resources in their immediate environment. Many development projects eat away at their precious resource base instead of trying to sustain it.
- The rich have an *extensive consumption pattern*. They purchase and consume products that are not created in their immediate environment, or even within their country. These products directly impact the environments in which they were created, but the consumers are not immediately affected by their unsustainable habits.



The richest people's unsustainable consumption patterns are wreaking havoc on the poorest people's habitat. The poor are struggling to meet their needs using fewer resources each day. As a result, their lives are steadily becoming more miserable.

What is an ecological footprint?

Most rich consumers are unaware of their *ecological footprint*, the impact that their consumption habits have on the distant environments where the products were created. For example, a rich man who wears a cotton shirt does not know anything about the environmental impacts of the agricultural system in which the cotton was grown, nor does he know about the factory that dyed the cotton. Globalisation and free trade further remove rich consumers from the ecological consequences of their consumption.

Why does economic development make poverty worse?

Though economic development has long been touted as the antidote to poverty, many development projects actually worsen poverty problems. Development commonly means the intensive use, and often overuse, of natural resources. Deforestation, desertification, and loss of biodiversity are all unintended consequences associated with economic development schemes. The poorest people, who are entirely dependent on their local resources, are seriously affected by this environmental disturbance.

Why are "trickle down" economics not helping the poor?

Most international institutions regard the Gross National Product (GNP) as a barometer of development and wealth. By increasing the GNP, these institutions hope to increase the quality of life by allowing benefits to "trickle down" to those in need. In reality, when GNP increases, the rich get richer but the poor stay poor because they are not integrated into the national or global economic systems. The poor are part of a biomass-based subsistence economy, and thus they rely upon a different GNP — the **Gross Nature Product**. This GNP is rarely compatible with economic development, as we know it.



Shining example

In 1975, the village of Ralegan Siddhi in western India was stricken by chronic poverty. Located within a drought-prone area of Maharashtra, the village could produce merely 30 per cent of the food it required. Many fields were not irrigated, and those that were had low crop yields. Most Ralegan men were forced to migrate out of the village each year to search for work.

A retired driver from the Indian Army, Krishna Bhaurao Hazare, helped to raise Ralegan's ground-water table by constructing storage ponds and reservoirs. At the same time 300,000–400,000 trees were planted around the village. The new water supply increased the farming area by 50 per cent. Villagers dug community wells, and used the water to cultivate more crops each year. They began to export the excess fruit and vegetables to destinations as distant as Dubai. Soon the villagers' savings reached an incredible Rupees 3 crore (US \$0.7 million).

To ensure that the new water supply was distributed equitably, Ralegan developed a *Gram Sabha*, or village assembly. This participatory democratic institution followed Gandhian rural development philosophy by involving all villagers in the planning process. The village also incorporated individual participation through *Shramdan* — a voluntary labour program. *Shramdan* provided a work force for development projects, while forging a sense of unity among the villagers.

Ralegan's remarkable transformation was made possible by the inhabitants' commitment to equitable local development. The villagers received no special treatment from the government; they simply worked effectively with the officials. The villagers used the *Gram Sabha* — the village assembly — to articulate their needs, and then implemented projects with those needs in mind.

Why should poverty alleviation initiatives be refocused?

- Any developmental process that destroys the environment will inevitably lead to more poverty. Economic development needs to be tied to environmental conservation. This is especially true in developing countries, where governments yearning for investors may choose money over nature. Economic development easily becomes an exercise in *environmental injustice*, perpetrated by the rich against the poor:
- In highly populated countries like India, where people are using every possible ecological niche, any environmental degradation will lead to increased impoverishment.
- Poor people depend more on their immediate environment than they depend on the national economy. They are unlikely to benefit from the development projects that degrade their surroundings.
- Pollution impacts the poor more than the rich. The rich can protect themselves from pollution by using their money to avoid unhealthy things: they can buy bottled water, move to cleaner neighbourhoods, and seek medical treatment if necessary. The poor have no option but to use polluted waterways, eat unsafe food, and live with contaminated soil.

Why are women more affected by poverty?

Household responsibilities: Women are responsible for gathering household resources such as water, food, fuel, and fodder. Environmental disturbance and extreme conditions make these resources scarce, forcing women to walk farther and farther every day to find them.

Women's health: Women often take food only after the rest of their family has been fed; if there is not enough to eat, they suffer the most. Pregnant and lactating women need more calories, but they often cannot get them. Women are often malnourished, making them more susceptible to illness.

Access to family resources and representation: Women are not usually given control over their family's money or land. This lack of access to resources makes it difficult for them to better their lives. They are under-represented on decision-making boards and their perspectives are often ignored.

Challenges ahead

Empower the poor: **The poor are potentially the best stewards of their environment.** Because they are dependent on their surroundings, they have a vested interest in ensuring the long-term ecological health of their habitat. With education and funding, they can become ardent supporters of responsible environmental conservation.

Rethink development initiatives: The current poverty alleviation initiatives mostly focus on unsustainable economic development. International institutions should couple development with environmental protection to **ensure that the poor are not forced to compete with industrial uses of local resources.**

Focus on community-based projects: The "trickle down" approach to development is not working. Resources should be directed to local communities to ensure that they reach the populations for which they are intended. Suitable projects can help the poor gradually integrate themselves into money-based economies.

Give women a voice: Poor women are tired, overworked, and undernourished. They often lack the economic and political power to change their situation. Development initiatives must propose projects that **incorporate women into the decision making process**, and which focus specifically on women. Educating women should be a top priority.