



Environmentalism of the Poor and Sustainable Development: An Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper highlights the main factors why environmentalism of the poor (EOP) has the potential to becoming the main driving force for achieving an ecologically sustainable society. Until recently, environmentalism was seen as a preserve of the rich or northern societies while EOP was often overlooked as a movement more motivated by social issues and survival than concerned with the environment. The key to truly empowering EOP and taking advantage of its inherent qualities is allowing the poor a more equitable and participatory role in the global sustainable development agenda. To this end, alliances between North and South will help ensure better global environmental governance by giving the South a stronger and fairer role in the future development of the global community.

Keywords: Environmentalism of the poor (EOP), sustainable development, North South alliance, gender, local activism, capacity building, livelihood, motivation, conservation, participation.

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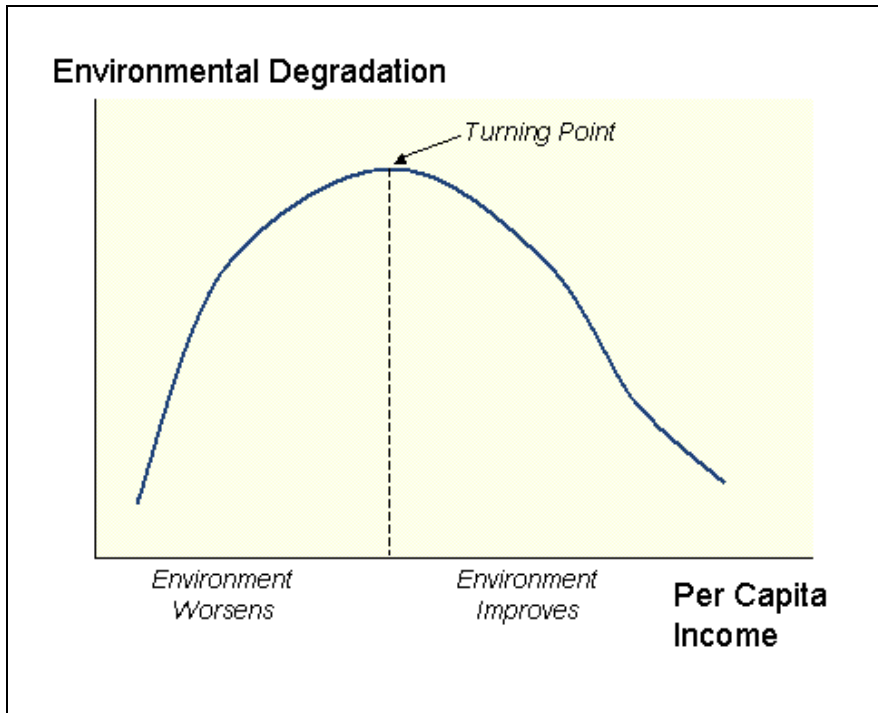
Introduction

This paper highlights the main factors why environmentalism of the poor (hereafter EOP) has the potential to become the main driving force to achieve an ecologically sustainable society. As Chambers (1987) said with regard to effective development strategies, “the poor are not the problem, they are the solution”.

Until recently, environmentalism was seen as a preserve of the rich or northern societies and was explained in terms of post-materialist values such as self-expression and quality of life (Martinez-Alier, 1995; Gaha, 2000; Brechin, 1999). However, EOP was often overlooked because it was seen to be more motivated by social issues and survival than concerned with the environment. Martinez-Alier (2005) therefore highlighted the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation, arguing that because the poor rely directly on the land and its natural resources, they have an intrinsic motivation to be careful managers of the environment. This is consistent with the Lawrence Summers’ principle that the effects of environmental degradation fall disproportionately on the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Quite simply, they have more to lose by failing to act on environmental issues. In addition, Guha (2000) disputes work based on post-material theory, for example by Inglehart (1995, 1997), that suggests strong positive correlations between wealth and concern with environmentalism.

Environmentalism movements that have been identified with the North include the Shallow Ecology Movement (Næss, 1973) which is concerned with pollution and resource depletion in order to maintain “the health and affluence of people in the developed countries”, and the Deep Ecology Movement that is mostly concerned with conservation and maintaining pristine wilderness. While Guha (1989, 1999) decries the efforts of the latter as a form of cultural imperialism (for example, the setting up of conservation reserves that exclude access to local peoples), he regards the former as environmentalism more representative of the environmental activities typically found in the south. More generally, environmentalism of the rich (EOR) could therefore be said to be largely concerned with conservation and preservation (Guha, 2000). Although more recently it has become more concerned with global issues such as climate change, with the exception of the Environmental Justice Movement (see Martinez-Alier (2002) for a good background on this), it does not question the social injustices upon which capitalism has been built, and which ultimately, are responsible for the smaller, yet countless local environmental crises (Basole, 2006). In general terms EOR traditionally bases many of its ideas on the environmental Kuznets curve (Figure 1), which concludes that the cure for degradation is more growth (Basole, 2006).

Figure 1. The environmental Kuznets curve



Source: http://450.aers.psu.edu/development_environment.cfm

By contrast, EOP centres on social justice, and the premise that the fight for human rights and environmental issues are inseparable. By successfully defending sustainable ways of life, it also shows that there need not be any conflict between ecological goals and social justice goals (Basole, 2006). Action by rubber tappers in Brazil, for example, led to parts of Amazonia being designated as ‘extractive reserves’ that combine conservation and the use of forests as a human resource. This paper will now explore why this form of environmentalism offers much in terms of moving towards achieving a global sustainable community. It includes examples of successful activism from the South and problems associated with EOR to help illustrate and expand upon these key points.

Key aspects and strengths of EOP

An important factor to consider in relation to understanding why EOP might be such an effective force is gender. As Martinez-Alier (2002) emphasises, it is important to recognise the contribution women make towards environmentalism in poor communities, particularly in rural areas. Since it is they who more often collect water, gather wood, and harvest produce, they have a closer day-to-day involvement in, and deeper awareness of their community and its dependence on a healthy environment. As a result, women are often the main actors of environmental conflicts (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Notable examples of movements inspired by the activism of women include the founding of the Chipko (tree-huggers) movement in India, and the Kenyan Green Belt Movement founded by the Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai in 1977. Like the majority of the south, the women, by being closer to nature, are intrinsically motivated to ensure the health and well-being of the environment.

Other factors particular to the south also act as strong motivators to carry out environmental action. The term EOP relates to social action and concerns in situations where the environment is a source of livelihood. If this livelihood is threatened, quite simply, those affected will be intrinsically motivated to act. Indeed, “for the sustenance economies of the Global South, a clean and safe environment is often a matter of life and death rather than a luxury good to be consumed in a national park” (Basole, 2006). To help put this into context, between 1990 and 1998, Oxfam reported that 94% of the world’s biggest natural disasters occurred in the developing world and with 75% of the population in these areas living in rural areas, they are therefore far more likely to be affected by environmental degradation than people in the North.

The fundamental clash between economics and the environment that has intensified with the dominance of neo-liberal free trade policy, has brought about a shift of environmental issues well beyond the post materialist concerns of ‘quality of life’ to those of ecological distribution conflicts of which EOP can play an increasingly important role in tackling. Indeed, as Martinez-Alier (2002) points out, many social conflicts stem from the poor trying to retain the environmental resources of their livelihood. Examples include the peasant movements in India and other countries in South America, Asia and Africa, which have been created in response to efforts by large multi-nationals to develop patented products from traditional seed stocks. Cases brought by eco-peasant organisations such as COICA (a confederation of indigenous organisations of Amazonia) and the formation of the En Defensa del Maiz in Mexico, have managed to create a wider awareness to the issues surrounding biopiracy, agroecology, and the importance and possible economic value for developing nations and their peoples of managing and maintaining control of in-situ agricultural biodiversity. There are also numerous cases of environmental movements in developing countries that put their lives on the line to prevent their environments being destroyed by mining operations. Examples include the village of Bambamarca in Peru who have long been fighting the Southern Peru Copper Corporation, and the town of Tambo Grandes, which successfully fought against Manhattan Minerals to create an open-pit mine.

Whereas wealthier people of the North have in general lost the idea of the environment as their source of livelihood, as we have seen, the poor and largely rural populations of the South are more connected to the environment, and thus have a more intimate understanding of what is at stake by not managing it carefully. Because awareness of issues is a key conduit to effective action, it could be argued that the south therefore has a greater capacity for recognising and tackling environmental and social issues. As with action arising from ecological distribution conflicts mentioned above, there are many other examples in the south (Guha, 2000; Martinez-Alier, 2000; Martinez-Alier, 2005) which illustrate successful environmentalism by peasants and indigenous peoples with issues of social justice and livelihood with which they are inherently concerned, and see firsthand on a daily basis. In the north on the other hand, while people, consume increasing quantities of fish and shrimp, for example, none of the effects of falling local (often southern) fish stocks or mangrove destruction are ever seen first-hand and locally. Awareness to the externalised costs of their purchases can only be gained second-hand from campaign materials or from an individual’s commitment to find out about such issues.

Similarly, a criticism often levelled at EOR is that the dominating NGO’s lack legitimacy to effectively represent the interests of the people and communities who need the most help. Often, decisions of where and how to use money and resources is decided by people with little, if any, intimate experience and understanding of living close to nature, and in a close and subsistence-based community. The consequences of which are that particular needs may not be effectively addressed. During the massive aid effort following the 2005 tsunami, many necessities were simply overlooked, for example, women’s sanitary protection, and headscarves for Muslim women. With reports of

agencies competing to spend their huge budgets and 'fly the flag, it also showed that inappropriate motivation of Northern NGOs can also lead to ineffective resource allocation. Even more controversial was a 'trauma care' centre set up by Scientologists (Batha, 2005).

It is also important to consider the ease at which societies of the south and the north will adapt to the fundamental changes needed in order overcome they key problems created by the conflict of economic growth and the environment. With globalisation and population pressures putting ever more demands on the earth's limited resources, the emphasis of change needs to be on the sustainable use of habitats. Such ideas are already at the centre of much activism in the south making EOP a credible source of practical and realistic ideas, particularly when compared to the protectionist principles upon which much northern activism is still often based. An interesting example is the from the 1980's when the San-Francisco based ecology group Earth Island Institute took out a lawsuit to widen the US enforced protection of turtles through the use of Turtle Exclusion Devices (TEDs) by the shrimp industry. Claims however were made that the enforced use of TEDs led to an increase in the farming of shrimp which can have devastating impacts on local fishing industries and costal environments, in particular, mangrove habitats. In response, southern environmental groups in countries such as Thailand, Ecuador, and India fought for greater regulation of the aquaculture industry. In India local fishing communities and NGO's worked to try and preserve environmentally sensitive areas such as Bhitara Kanika which is ironically home to the endangered species of the Olive Ridley turtle. And as reported

... the issuing of certification will do very little to ensure a socially and ecologically sound practice, instead it provides psychological comfort to rich consumers who want to feel 'green'. The 'turtle safe' certificate for cultured shrimp is a death certificate for the turtles of Bhitara Kanika and the people throughout India's coast (Special United Nations Service, 1996)

As already mentioned, an example of the type of balanced policy needed to reconcile environmental preservation with sustainable economic activity is the creation of 'extractive reserves' for the sustainable use of parts of the Brazilian rainforests. Similarly, with the issue of shrimp fishing, surely the emphasis of environmentalists in the North should not be solely focused on the conservation of turtles by banning forms of shrimp fishing. Instead in might be wiser and more pragmatic to campaign for more sustainable consumption levels of wild caught shrimp from locally managed fisheries.

On a more general level, societies in the south, which mostly consist of populations through their more traditional but lower economic level of living, live day-to-day, simpler and less materialistic lives than those of the North. As a result is reasonable to deduce that they would be intrinsically more able to return to a sustainable society. For instance, one of the key hurdles for creating a sustainable society is to break away from the addition to a fossil fuel based energy intensive economy. Most developing countries however, already use fractional amounts of fossil fuel energy per capita than most countries of the north and are often more suited to renewable energy creation. Kenya for example already has the highest number of solar power units per capita than any other country. Other areas where people and values in the South are less removed from those needed for a sustainable society, centre around the values of thrift, frugality and placing less value on consumption and material goods.

As illustrated by the conflicts in India, Mexico, and Brazil over transgenic crops, the poor are also less likely to embrace technology and science to solve ecological problems (Martinez-Alier, 2002) and thus could be said to be more in tune with the 'precautionary principle'. Inherently a non-

scientific guide, this principle is regarded by many as an essential principle of environmentalism, and as environmental crises become increasingly global and complex, learning to incorporate the principle into key policy areas is another reason for turning to EOP initiatives as a guide.

With tradition and subsistence often already key aspects of societies in the South, particularly in rural areas, it can be argued that the south also has a greater sense of community, and with it, a greater connection to the importance of human capital and community participation. This is a great asset for environmentalism and is increasingly regarded as central to managing natural resources in a sustainable manner (Amanor, 2003). In addition, Amanor (2003) recognises the value of so called community-based resource management (CBRM) by highlighting the “sophisticated methods of resource use and institutions” such as those developed by the Kerela fishing community in India, but which are under threat from mechanised fishing methods introduced as an unintended result of the Indo-Norwegian Project for Fisheries Community Development (Kurien, 1985).

Despite these successful communities in the south, there is an increasing realisation of the so called ‘governance gap’ created by the enormous shift of power to the trans-national corporations (TNCs). This has led to the EC for example calling for greater participation of stakeholders. With over 80% the world’s population living in developing countries, this should ultimately mean a much more active role of the south in environmental international governance. Indeed, the focus on ‘bottom-up’ activities has been gaining attention since 1992 when the emphasis of local level action for sustainable development was initiated at the UN ‘Earth Summit’. As part of the Rio Declaration (Agenda 21), the summit’s global action plan for sustainability, Chapter 28, known as Local Agenda 21, agreed that building partnerships and involving local people in the decision making process was essential to achieving local sustainable development, and that this would ultimately contribute to the wider global sustainability agenda.

Similarly, growing attention is being paid to ‘localization’ of economies (Amanor, 2003; Hines & Lang, 2003; Retallack, 2001; Shiva, 2005). While Shiva remarks that this is a “social and ecological imperative” (2005), Retallack usefully points out that:

In a local economy, when a locally owned investment damages the environment, the investor and his or her local community are more likely to be immediately aware and directly affected by it. And as the local community is more likely to know or have access to that investor, it has a strong incentive and capacity to force the investor to address the problem rapidly (Retallack, 2001).

Globalisation and free trade have meant that the investor has increasingly come to mean trans-national corporations and “power is detached from responsibility and those who take decisions are separated from those who are affected by them” (Retallack, 2001). Thus externalities such as pollution, deforestation, loss of bio-diversity, can continue to be exported without any accountability. On the other hand, the people in the South who still live at a subsistence level and rely on local markets and economy, can be expected to have a closer practical knowledge and appreciation of the idea of localisation, and will of course be more aware of any externalities of their actions because they will themselves be localised rather than far away and unseen and experienced.

Even if we accept these qualities of EOP as potentially advancing sustainable communities, for EOP to be truly effective it needs to have a global influence. As Glassman (2001) comments, local movements need to become international in order to challenge the power of trans-national corporations. So an important question is whether EOP has the capacity to have a global impact. This

is particularly important because the most serious environmental threats such as global warming, loss of biodiversity, and water and air pollution, are increasingly global in nature.

There are a number of well known cases however which illustrate that local activism in the south can grow to the extent that it has a significant impact at a global level. Graydon (2005) for example, writing for *The Ecologist*, regards Wangari Maathai's activism as having "thrust the environment to the forefront of the global security agenda", and as Martinez-Alier (2000) comments, there is now evidence of a worldwide movement for sustainable farming or 'agroecology' born of, and supported by, local struggles. As a result, as we saw earlier, issues such as farmers' rights and bio-piracy are now on the global agenda.

There are also many other instances where the influence of local EOP has had wider impacts. For example, numerous protests and direct actions against oil exploration by indigenous peoples and local communities such as the Ogoni and Ijaw in the Niger Delta, the U'wa in Columbia, and the Nahua and Ashaninka in Peru, were influential in Oilwatch being formed in 1995. This is a "network of national and regional organizations that acts at the local level so that they can intervene in a united way at the international level in protection of the lives and livelihood of local peoples" (Oilwatch, 2005) and deals with issues of biodiversity, pollution, deforestation, protection of indigenous territorial rights, and global climate change. In Kyoto, in 1997, it saw 200 organisations sign a declaration that helped draw attention to the importance of recognising ecological debt and the polluter pays principle with regard to oil extraction (Martinez-Alier, 2000). Action by the Ijaw which led to the Kaiama declaration, also successfully linked the global issue of climate change to local issues. In contrast, single issue NGOs which often dominate EOR, can reinforce dichotomies between social and ecological factors.

Local movements in the South have also led to international networks being created that have successfully linked the local movements to wider global issues. Examples include the Chipko movement and the Narmada anti-dam movement, both from India. The Chipko grassroots protest movement against commercial forestry involved a long history of strikes and go-slows. Successes in achieving logging bans saw it develop from a peasant movement to a global campaign for sustainable forestry (Adams, 2001; Bandyopadhyay, 1992). The Narmada anti-dam movement also led to other movements of social and environmental protest which have "become increasingly internationalised, and increasingly linked with wider social movements" (Adams, 2001).

Another example is the peasant led activism in Peru against mining in Tambo Grande mentioned earlier. General strikes led to a referendum in 2002 in which over 90% of voters rejected mining plans by a Canadian company. Part of the success was the result of engaging the support of regional, national and international NGOs including Oxfam America and linking their fight to keep their livelihood with issues of preserving biological and cultural diversity. This example of EOP is also interesting because it chronicles a change in strategies used by the protest movement. While in its early days, there were violent protests, more recent activism has involved peaceful protests, political manoeuvring, and the use of popular culture and technology to publicize their cause. In 2007, a film was even released about the protest movement called *Tambo Grande: Mangos, Murder, Mining*.

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen that there are many inherent qualities associated with the kind of environmental actions and movements that are typical of the south and that we have been referring to as Environmentalism of the poor. These include the stronger motivation to act positively towards the environment by women and the rural populations, the latter of which are proportionately far greater

in the south. In addition, values are also closer to those which are regarded as fundamental for any society that is to effectively follow a course towards sustainable development. Most notably, people of the south may be expected to be less consumer orientated, have a stronger tradition of grass-roots action and community value, rely more upon local economies, and be more likely to follow the precautionary principle rather than profit margins and wealth as the basis of their decisions. We have also seen that at times EOP can have a global influence which is needed to tackle many of the most serious environmental social challenges to be overcome in order for the global community to move closer towards the goal of a sustainable future. Despite these many valuable traits, the question needs to be asked whether EOP has the resources to carry out much of the work needed for the most serious environmental problems to be overcome. At the heart of this question is the question of adequate resources or what is often referred to as 'capacity'. One answer is, as the case of Tambo Grande showed, for some environmental movements to form alliances in order to be successful. In particular, challenges more specific to EOP, such as awareness of rights, political and market power, of course, the matter of adequate funding, could be addressed by forming alliances with northern actors.

As social and environmental issues continue to expand temporally and spatially, political participation and representation are becoming increasingly challenging (Christoff, 1999). The increasing complexity and intensity of informational needs for decisions on sustainable development mean that capacity of grassroots actors to make informed choices and have democratic representation are becoming harder to obtain. This is particularly important because as Christoff (1999) points out, one of the defining aspects of successful environmentalism is the ability to extend social welfare and recognised universal environmental principals so that they can be part of the political, judicial and social fabric of society.

The South's capacity for spreading ones message and influence can be helped by media and communication networks which are inevitably dominated by northern-based actors. By forming an alliance, the south can therefore strengthen their representation in the media, the scientific establishment, politics and NGOs. A good example of this is of the small farming community of the Penan, in Malaysia. Their fight in the 80's against loggers became a major controversy after Greenpeace, and the Rainforest Action Group joined them and helped to publicize it.

Another advantage of forming an alliance is that it can widen the sphere of accountability and reduce the likelihood of 'not in my backyard yard' (NIMBY) politics or indeed through better understanding, reduce the chances that even well intentioned activism simply shifts damages elsewhere (i.e. usually southward). This happened in Japan in the 70's when successful protests over the building of an aluminium plant led to its relocation to Venezuela (Broadbent, 1998).

For alliances to be formed, understanding is particularly important because different actors will have different sets of values. Mangrove preservation for example, can involve conflict over their aesthetic, practical, or culture value. Forming alliances can be one way of helping the different stakeholders to accept the pluralism of values (Martinez-Alier, 2000).

Ultimately, such alliances could help address the issue of ecological debt and the legitimate claims the South have to property rights of carbon sinks and other so called 'global commons' disputes with the North. Getting redress on carbon debt for example, through negotiations on climate change, international trade, corporate accountability, and farmers rights will increasingly be an incentive for the South to form cooperative alliances such as the fair trade movement. Success in this area has been the recent 'down-to-top' movements that have emerged in recognition of these issues (Martinez-Alier, 2000). An example is The Alliance for Climate between a network group of

indigenous peoples in Amazonia (COICA) and European cities concerned about their carbon footprints.

In conclusion, many examples of effective initiatives show that EOP has the potential to make real change towards sustainable development but to realise a global sustainable future, it is essential that the poor are given a more equitable and participatory role in the global sustainable development agenda. To this end, alliances between North and South will help ensure better global environmental governance by giving the South a stronger and fairer role in the future development of the global community. In turn, this will allow the many inherent qualities EOP exhibits for creating sustainable communities to be used to their full potential.

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