

REDUCING POVERTY BY SOLVING ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

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Once again, this decade is characterized by the “poverty agenda” after an acknowledgement on the part of decision makers of the developed world that the number of poor people has grown – mainly in developing countries – as well as the gap between rich and poor. Clearly an exchange of priorities from the previous decade.

The description on how best to address the needs of poor nations or poor societies differs. While some leaders of multilateral organizations and industrialized countries, as well as leaders from the focus countries themselves, believe that it can be achieved only through improved education and health conditions, others consider that shorter-term results are needed.

Curbing the poverty line requires thinking about the short and long term, about culture, about drivers, about leadership, and many other factors inter-twined in time. But what is evident is that placing an objective at the top of the list means other topics are left out or degraded.

Present evaluations clearly show that the “poverty agenda” has substituted the environmental agenda, and has degraded education, a goal that can only be achieved in two or more decades. It’s also clear that this exchange of priorities has not properly recognized that the destruction or mismanagement of nature’s wealth is one of the most important sources of poverty.

The main concern in the selection of poverty reduction as a goal for the development agenda is that we need to recognize that poverty is mainly the result of mismanagement of natural resources, not always the cause. And it’s being treated as a cause.

The risks of such focus are many. It’s generally reflected in a top-down approach that’s often based on charity instead of solidarity. And societies that are suffering from poverty need to work on alternatives characterized by a sense of ownership of the actions proposed. External support therefore should contribute and support local processes. It also implies respect and tolerance of other ways of life as equally acceptable – and it also implies that not all variables can or should be quantifiable in economic terms.

Lack of, or scarcity of natural resources is most often than not, the result of abusive behaviors originated in over-exploitation of a specific resource for economic gains. Destruction of forests for timber exploitation, of soil for intensive farming, of water for luxury use, are only a few of the causes for degradation of ecosystems which, if well managed, would better support human pressure.

There is no doubt that – amongst others - market forces (external factors) as well as local culture (internal factors) are key drivers for maintenance or deterioration of an ecosystem and its natural resources, and both need to be taken into account when evaluating the state of the environment in a given country or region as well as the trends and possible scenarios.

Notwithstanding the immense financial resources that pour into the poorer countries, poverty continues to grow, well designed programs are not making much difference, frustration increases both in do-

nor and recipient countries and the natural environment continues to deteriorate. A logical conclusion is that development institutions and programs are not addressing the real needs.

What and how can this situation change? Let's try a couple of ideas: (1) concentrate on the roots of poverty and not the symptoms. This statement suggests the need to recuperate the lost agendas: investment in natural resources management and education. Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, tourism, are only a few of the economic alternatives based on the recognition that nature is the main capital on which a society can build its future and knowledge management / education is the instrument to guarantee quality growth. Both appear to have lost interest in the donor community probably because they are not "one track" agendas with quick returns. To achieve significant results and sustainability, there is a need to engage multiple actors and factors. And unfortunately, the results are not seen in short political terms, but rather in longer but more significant periods of time.

And (2), look at environment and natural resources management as a good investment in which many actors need to intervene, together; national and local governments, the private sector, social groups of different kind cannot continue to work independently from the others, hoping to achieve important results on their own. Not only is it important to integrate forces and needs, but to bring together different generations and perspectives.

Taking water as an example – both from the point of view of quality and availability – allows us to identify the chain of actions and potential impacts:

- -better quality, improved health, reduced medical costs, more pro-active and productive society
- watershed management: steady supply of water for agriculture, for urban use, for energy

Finally, for community / local people, the sense of wealth comes from ownership of land, of water and vegetation. Nature provides a sense of identity and belonging, and those are also important basis for development.