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The Environmental Crisis in the Third World

by Thomas L. Blair, Ph. D., London *

The destruction of the environment is not a threat to industrialised countries alone but also to those strenuously endeavouring after economic progress. Development efforts are often accompanied by disastrous effects for the environment. In view of such gloomy aspects a new development strategy is to be conceived.

Today as the newly-developing nations and peoples of Africa, Asia and America gear themselves for the Second Development Decade there is a huge debit growing against the environment which future generations may never be able to repay. This debit arises not from the folly of centuries-old cultural practices nor the feeble efforts of villagers and tribesmen to woo a living from the earth. Its cause is the ecologically un-planned application of technology to development projects. Paradoxically the imported instruments of development financed and built by the advanced nations are polluting and destroying Third World environments.

The Quest for Development

Development is a dream of the transformation of society and the harnessing of human skills and material resources to abolish the stark realities of life. It is a house where there was a hovel, a clinic where there was disease and filth, and a school where there was widespread ignorance. All over the Third World the quest for development is linked with a surging desire for economic as well as political self-determination. "It is the promise of tomorrow," said President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, "that arouses us with a new vitality like the first touch of the strong sun's rays which catch the new-born animal lying on our Serengeti plains and sends it straightaway bounding into life."

But something has gone wrong: The casebooks of international conservation agencies are filled with "development horror stories" as Professor Kenneth Boulding of the University of Colorado has called them: Shoreline erosion caused by dam projects on the Nile River; abandonment of a Central Pacific island after phosphate mining operations caused soil deterioration; drastic loss

in cotton production in a Peruvian Valley after the introduction of pesticides; and the destruction of the farming practices of the Tonga people near the 1,700 square-mile Kariba dam in Central Africa, the world's largest man-made lake.

Development horror stories are the negative results of planned and unplanned actions by the major actors in the development drama: the western nations, industrialists and aid-granting institutions. In effect they are what Paul Ehrlich calls eco-catastrophes i.e. spectacular attacks by man on the ecological systems which sustain his life. In their wake follows traumatic climatic changes, disturbance of river systems, loss of habitats, increased incidence of diseases, and the disruption and degeneration of erstwhile self-sufficient human communities in balance with their bio-physical environments.

Intensive large-scale land use and powerful technological methods affect biotic communities. Unplanned use of pesticides and weed-killers eradicates "pathogenic" life and upsets complex eco-systems. Uncontrolled tree cutting threatens forest resources; the mahogany forests of Haiti have been stripped for export, and those of Honduras are now threatened. The thoughtless introduction of exotic plants and animals displace indigenous species and threaten the stability of the bio-physical environment.

Three Factors of the Crisis

Unplanned watershed development lowers water quality and quantity in valleys. Irrigation spreads debilitating liver-fluke diseases and schistosomiasis. Dams and reservoirs and the dumping of high temperature water by thermal power stations and factories causes a drop in oxygen content of water which harms fish life and encourages excessive growth of aquatic plants. Hydro-biological contamination occurs from the residual decom-

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position products – nitrogen phosphates and carbon – of organic compounds dumped into water.

The frightening aspects of the environmental crisis in the Third World, as seen by them, do not arise from the biospheric disasters spoken of so eloquently in Western nations, nor does it result from the actions of its own populations. The real dangers lie in three factors:

- the rise and diversity of pollution,
- the destruction of eco-systems, resources and population balances, and
- the rise of new diseases, resistant species and harmful effects on man.

And they are the consequences of massive aid and development projects.

Agriculturalists, engineers and marketing experts use their skills to devise schemes that will provide food, power, employment and industrialisation in the underdeveloped countries. But even the best intended and best-planned projects rarely take into account the unplanned and negative consequences upon the environment and man. The resultant fiascos are as typical of new forms of multilateral aid projects as they are of bilateral development programmes initiated by the old colonial powers. Solutions must be sought through a fundamental reassessment of the whole development process—from goals and intentions, down to the techniques used and results on the ground to men and the environment.

Arising Ethics of Survival

America, Britain, France, Germany and the advanced countries enjoy a high standard of living by persistent and skillful scientific and technological exploitation of the natural environment at home and abroad. But there is a widespread feeling of revulsion at the rape of the world's resources—*Raubwirtschaft* economics—and at the "Tyranny of the GNP" and other ethic of "progress" which supports it. There is also the feeling that complacency over the ecological boomerangs of applied and wasteful technology, within the context of the world population explosion and environmental crisis, is not only inhuman, but dangerous. The biosphere can't stand it; and more and more of the world's peoples are expressing their discontent.

Following upon the efforts of ecologists and conservationists, like Barry Commoner, Frank Fraser Darling, Rene Dubos and many others, a whole new literature on the environmental crisis developed. Current discussion in America and the Western advanced nations centre around the

proposition that "growth-based economies are a threat to man and the finite environment". A series of questions have been raised: Is survival economically feasible? What are the economics of effective conservation of the environment? How can economic activities be manipulated so as to serve human purposes and still remain viable? How and under what conditions can there be a rapprochement between economics, culture and environment?

Two further questions which follow from these have relevance here: What's in it for the Third World? Does the Third World concur? The peoples and nations of the Third World want to share in the feats of modern technology – power plants, electronic machines, synthetic materials, improved agriculture and food production, and increased length of life. They seek a transference of technological know-how and the mechanisms of development which will when allied to their own ideal forms of modernisation, political and cultural evolution provide a healthy and viable way forward.

The Defence of the Third World

At the moment Third World nations have little power over their own economic, political or ecological destinies; and they are not the major polluters and destroyers of their environments. They recognise however that their resources, so important to Western nations, are crucial for the long-term development of the Third World, as well as for the preservation of the biosphere itself. Every barrel, ton and shipload of their resources, used by others without adequate compensation—and worse yet, torn from the land without consideration for man and the environment—is an act of violence against the lives of future generations.

Development and the defence of Third World resources from robbery, depletion and the negative ecological consequences of large-scale projects are inter-related. The road to development in the Third World must include therefore the proper management of eco-systems.

For all these reasons, it behoves both the Third World and the advanced nations to bring about a change in practice and in ethics. Renewable resources must be utilised in a manner and at a rate which does not destroy their potential restoration by natural processes. Sound conservation practices must govern the use of non-renewable resources. Western enterprises—the major polluters and disrupters in the Third World—have the know-how and the wealth to radically change their approach. Governments, industries, and aid-granting development agencies

must examine the ecological consequences of their actions and deal with them without prejudice to the hopes and desires of Third World peoples for rapid economic and social progress.

A New Concept of Development Planning

Strategic problems lie ahead in devising methods and programmes of assessing the role in development planning of three sets of factors:

- environmental factors,
- financial, fiscal and pricing policies, and
- public administration and legislative measures.

Development planning rarely takes into account environmental factors and their integration with other elements of the development programme. Furthermore, alternative projects having differing environmental consequences are rarely studied. A very fundamental aim of development planners, technologists and government advisors must be to devise methods of assessing:

- environmental values in economic analysis,
- different types of cost-benefit analysis applied to environmental evaluation,
- optimal choices of projects in relation to environmental problems,
- relative costs and definitions of priorities in the restoration and maintenance of environmental quality, and
- the social and behavioural responses to environmental problems.

In addition, some fundamental questions must be asked about financial, fiscal and pricing policies as they relate to environmental problems, industry and trade.

Growing Knowledge of Environmental Problems

Finally, rational management and control over environmental use poses many problems. It is necessary to develop and strengthen regulatory services, including administration and management and legislation. Particular support should be given to laboratories for analytical control as well as research needed to provide the technological knowledge on which regulations can be based. Special concern must be expressed within government itself. Basic information for environmental policy decision making must be gathered by a comparative review of existing governmental machinery for environmental planning, management and control. Furthermore, the organisational implications of a national environmental policy must be seen in relationship to other policies

regarding population settlement, colonisation schemes, industrialisation and urbanisation.

There is no need for blanket termination of foreign-assistance programmes. Rather is it necessary to pay increased attention to ecological factors as integral parts of all phases of development. Ecological factors and expertise should be included in pre-investment surveys and in all planning, decision-making and action phases of development. The training of development experts must be improved. More support is needed for research into how adverse effects can be eliminated. More experiments are needed with intermediate technology and ecologically sound techniques adaptable to tropical and arid zones. The costs involved must be written off against the long-term benefits accruing from more effective and rational use of resources.

Modifying the State Apparatus

Achieving a rational and just environmental policy linked to development planning also requires a change in the state apparatus and in the value systems of national élites. The structures of colonial capitalism, inherited from the past, may have to be abandoned in favour of new structures and management systems capable of dealing with all the implications of the importation of new technology and modernisation ideas. A new morality is needed, in the fields of resource/exploration, exploitation, investment and trade, to alter the priorities to which politicians and administrators feel compelled to respond.

This new view as it is now emerging in the Third World has four basic characteristics:

- The adoption of a global view of the economy and the application of macro-economic theory and econometrics to national accounting, input/output analysis and projection and forecasting techniques.
- Active state involvement in economic matters based on awareness of the inadequacy of the price mechanism as an allocational instrument for ensuring a sustained and high level of economic activity or as a guide for long-term investment decisions.
- Concern with long-term objectives and the structural changes required to achieve them.
- Widening democratic participation in the planning process as a means for mobilising popular support and the active involvement of economic agents and collective organisations in the decision making process.

The practice of democratic planning is, of course, a much needed ingredient in the whole environmental and development planning problem. In

considering the question of democratic planning, however, Third World political leaders are aware of a number of cultural discontinuities between themselves and the Western and Soviet bloc nations.

A Democratic Approach

If the Third World nations choose Western style "democracy" and "planning" as an approach to economic and social development they cannot wait for voluntary institutions to arise, as they did in Western nations. Government policy must create the institutional infrastructure for development and spur its growth by state power and intervention. If the "socialist way" is chosen, as it has been in Algeria, Cuba, and Chile, for example, then new dilemmas of speed, scope and direction arise. How can rapid development be achieved without a purposeful state mechanism, a disciplined Marxist ruling party, and educated cadres devoted to the cause of social reconstruction?

And in the case of either choice, or a "middle way" option: How to avoid the rhetoric of development—e.g., "cooperation" and "popular participation"—which fails to orientate itself towards the needs of the masses of people in the traditional sector, to deal with issues of social justice and equality and to change the social and economic structures hindering progress?

Agrarian Reforms Important

Talking about environmental problems and the "Environmental Crisis" is of little practical value if there is widespread land hunger, pauperisation, demographic anaemia and the exodus of peasants and landless families from their traditional homelands. Development projects, no matter what their proposed value is, have no credibility whatsoever, if they are accompanied by the spoliation of land, fraudulent alienation of common lands, and the destruction of communal tenure systems and related social systems by the introduction of private property and land pricing.

Environmentally-sound development programmes need to be linked with rural resource development and social reconstruction. Wherever possible, proposals for development should be linked with agrarian reforms to implement such basic changes as: redistribution of existing land; reforestation; gaining more productive land through small-scale soil reclamation techniques and the rational use of pasturage; agricultural education and establishment of centres of peasant family cultivation; and large-scale directed collectivisation based on workers' self-management.

Some immediate actions which might be taken include the following:

Direct action is necessary to curb the polluting activities of major expatriate enterprises. Restrictions should be placed on the import of polluting "second-class" technology as there is good evidence that many foreign industries, threatened by antipollution legislation and financial sanctions in their home countries, support their profit margins by exporting their polluting technology abroad.

Representation must be made in all the major capitals to support the application of constraint and incentive systems and the elimination, where necessary, of all subsidies by foreign governments to major enterprises polluting environments abroad. Furthermore, pressures should be brought upon all aid-granting agencies to support non-polluting and less-destructive large scale projects.

Governments should seek to encourage international agreements in controlling environmental destruction. A start has been made; for example, the Organisation of African Unity endorsed the African Convention on Conservation of Natural Resources in 1968.

Governments should also express their opinions at many levels of international development affairs. These include the post-colonial political and economic structures uniting the metropolises with their former colonies or client states, e.g. Britain and the Commonwealth, France and the Communauté, and America and the Latin American states; the various European regional inter-governmental organisations including the European Common Market; The Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, the world's largest donor of public and private development aid; and the World Bank Group, a powerful international development financing agency. All these organisations have created units to study major strategic problems related to the environmental crisis. Special committees are searching for new power and raw materials substitutes and new methods of recycling of wastes. Their findings will have a consequent potential impact on international markets and links with the Third World nations.

Governments should review the findings of the 1968 UNESCO-sponsored intergovernmental conference of experts on the scientific basis for rational use and conservation of resources. They should field wellbriefed delegations at the 1972 UNESCO-sponsored conference in Stockholm to encourage action to protect and improve the environment. Finally they should call for more international meetings on the ecological consequences of international assistance programmes.