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Impact of environmental degradation and diminishing natural resources on the poor

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Economic activity entails the use of natural resources and the production of residues that often harm the environment and the population at large. The unsustainable use of resources and the environmental degradation resulting from this growing economic activity give rise to pessimism about a future doomed by climate disruption, biodiversity loss, overpopulation, and environmental degradation (Klein, 2014; Costanza and Kubiszewski, 2014). Although many believe that business-as-usual is still possible, recent trends show our future as a society is at stake. Present-day tendencies have profound effects on sustainability, both for today's population and for generations to come. We are facing a societal breakdown that may only be averted if we are aware of such threats and concrete measures are undertaken (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013).

The rate at which resources are being used and the limited capacity of the planet to process harmful residues imply that a large share of the world population is and will be condemned to misery (Basu, 2011). Additionally, the effects of current resource use are also unequally distributed. *Healing a Broken World* describes the main environmental problems throughout the world and highlights the reasons why the poor are affected the most. The poor tend to be more exposed to natural risks and changing environmental conditions such as pollution, deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, and decreasing stocks of natural resources, both in quantity and quality, mainly due to unsustainable agricultural practices and their own pressure on natural resources as well as that of corporate interests (Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat, 2011).

In addition, state control of critical natural resources and essential environmental services tends to benefit existing vested interests and newly-established privileged business groups that have little interest in limiting or restricting production and rent-profit accumulation. Since those who benefit from state control may make a significant contribution to the country's overall economic growth, they receive further privileges in return, such as the effective right to displace local, informal users of resources like indigenous people, landless upland settlers and farmers, and proximate rural communities, resulting in losses of economic opportunities to such users and contributing to further exclusion and inequality. Beyond limiting access to resource use, these often foreign companies challenge health, environmental, and other social protection laws in the countries where they invest, and their disputes are settled in international courts that frequently overrule national ones (Worldwatch Institute, 2014).

Apart from unsustainable natural resources-based growth, other exogenous factors can further threaten the livelihoods of those most vulnerable. Regular drought, El Niño episodes, climate variability and change may alter living conditions, limit access to natural resources, and increase the frequency and intensity of disasters, exposing the population to further vulnerability (Klein, 2014). Households initially displaced and impoverished are often unable to move out of their deteriorated condition even in two or more generations. As a result intergenerational poverty worldwide is being deeply entrenched. Under current conditions environmental refugees could rise to 50 million worldwide by 2050 (Zellman, 2011). Additionally, if sea level rises by 1 meter, as is

expected from climate change, refugees could increase to 100 million, and if it rises by 6 meters, they could increase to 400 million (Rowley, 2007).

We must change the way we do things to prevent such calamities. Markets “do not have a social conscience, environmental ethic, or long-term vision” to address public interests with inclusiveness and fairness (Worldwatch Institute, 2014). Markets promote an increasing use of natural resources that result in significant and growing wealth gaps and eventual destitution for the poor. Only a different view of the environment and the corresponding natural resources can lead to a better stewardship of the planet and a sustainable livelihood for many, mostly the poor.

Following this line of thought, there are several areas of the hegemonic economics paradigm that ought to be questioned to promote a more sustainable and equitable economy, both in the short and long run. First, the use of current market prices of raw and processed natural resources and ecosystems are a most important factor, since the hegemonic paradigm treats them as if they had no intrinsic or existence value and as if they posed no threat to natural resources production and use. Linked to this is the assumed right of natural resource extractors and processors to appropriate and use the rent incomes for whatever personal purpose without recognizing that rent is the cost of the depleted resource. Second, future economic benefits need to be taken into account and valued as much as present ones, so the rights of generations to come are fully acknowledged.

Policy-wise, governments can steer national economies toward environmental sustainability by phasing out energy subsidies, enforcing energy efficiency standards and emission limits, and fostering sustainable cities and regions through economic incentives, procurement budgets, and infrastructure projects. This may help improve living conditions for both rural and urban populations and at the same time protect the environment (Worldwatch Institute, 2014).

However, governments alone may not achieve this. Involvement of the civil society is needed if we are to overcome deadlocks on environmental degradation and protect the communities that live off these resources by guarding the natural capital. According to the Worldwatch Institute, one-fifth of the approximately 1500 protests worldwide from 2006 to 2013 have been to claim global justice, particularly in the fields of environmental justice and protection of global resources (Worldwatch Institute, 2014). Attaining environmental sustainability includes other dimensions represented in social movements, such as justice, equity, and human rights. The poor no longer passively face exploitation related to environmental problems; civil groups now organize themselves to fight such injustice. Environmental groups claim time and again that people have a right to land, and once they have it, they usually care for it for themselves and their community. Many organizations have supported these movements (Pope Francis, 2014). Additional answers may come from solidarity cooperatives, community-based natural resources, environmental management groups, and citizens that pursue a humanistic, holistic, and sustainable social development approach (.

A sustainable future also entails reducing material throughput and redirecting consumption by building smaller, local economies that are in turn more sustainable and resilient. This may entail fostering a green economy based on a different style of production, thrift, and ecological restoration (Costanza and Kubiszewski, 2014; UNEP, 2011). Social movements may return the stewardship of the environment to the people by improving governance and building sustainable communities, both environmentally and socially (Prugh and Renner, 2014).

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