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The Environmentalism of the Poor

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACOFOP	Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén
AECO	Asociación Ecologista Costarricense
ATCA	Alient Torts Claims Act
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
CIAT	Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical
CNG	compressed natural gas
CODDEFFAGOLF	Comité para la Defensa y Desarrollo de la Flora y Fauna del Golfo de Fonseca
COICA	Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazonica
CONAMA	Comisión Nacional del Medio Ambiente de Guatemala
DBCP	dibromochloropropane
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ETC	Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FUNDECOL	Fundación de Defensa Ecológica Ecuador
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GRAIN	Genetic Resources Action International
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
IUCN	The World Conservation Union
KRRS	Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (Karnata State Farmers' Association)
LPG	liquefied petroleum gas
MOSOP	Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (Nigeria)
MW	megawatt
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NCR	National Capital Region
NEERI	National Environmental Engineering Research Institute
NIMBY	"Not in my back yard!"
NO_2	nitrogen dioxide
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
PREPARE	Preventive Environmental Protection Approaches in Europe
RAFI (now ETC)	Rural Advancement Foundation International
TEDs	Turtle Excluder Devices
ULSD	ultra-low sulphur diesel
UPOV	International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants
USA	United States of America
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development
VOCs	Volatile Organic Compounds
WHEACT	West Harlem Environmental Action
WFF	World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature

Abstract

The world economy is increasing its input of energy and materials, and also its output of different sorts of waste. Optimistic views on the "dematerialization" of the economy are premature. The environmental load of the economy, driven by consumption and by population growth, is growing all the time even when the economy (measured in money terms) is based on the service sector. Hence, the many ecological distribution conflicts that arise. They are not only conflicts of interests but also conflicts on values. In this report, several such conflicts are described, and the discrepancies in the languages of valuation used by different agents are emphasized.

Poor people have defended the environment in rural areas, and also in cities. Well-known instances include the Chipko movement in the Himalaya, the struggle on the Narmada dams, Chico Mendes' fight in Amazonia, and the struggles by the Ogoni, the Ijaw and other groups in the Niger Delta against the damage from oil extraction by Shell. Until recently, the agents in such conflicts rarely saw themselves as environmentalists. Their concern is with livelihood, with *oikonomia*. They struggle for environmental justice, and thereby they contribute to the environmental sustainability of the economy. Such environmentalism of livelihood is often expressed as the defence of legally established old community property rights. Sometimes, new community rights are invoked. The intermediary NGOs have given an explicit environmental meaning to such livelihood struggles, connecting them into wider networks and proposing new policies of worldwide relevance.

The report starts with conflicts related to the issue of biopiracy in agriculture, the fact that peasant varieties of crops and peasant knowledge have been up for grabs while "improved" seeds are increasingly protected by regimes of intellectual property rights. Such conflicts are reinforcing a view of agriculture based on the ideas of agroecology, energy efficiency, food security, no subsidies to exports, and the *in situ* conservation and co-evolution of plant genetic resources, which is expressed by networks such as Via Campesina. The second section studies urban conflicts. Large cities have "ecological footprints" much larger than their own territories. This section considers the ecological conflicts caused by the growth of cities that are internal to the cities themselves (local conflicts on air, soil and water pollution, for instance), and also the conflicts that are "exported" to larger geographical scales. Where are the main actors of the environmental conflicts caused by urban growth? Are indicators of urban unsustainability indicators also of social conflicts?

The third section describes conflicts on the extraction of oil. The Texaco case in Ecuador and the Shell case in the Delta in Nigeria raise important issues of corporate accountability. Other cases (Unocal in Myanmar, Occidental Petroleum in U'Wa territory in Colombia) are considered, showing how languages of human rights, indigenous territorial rights, and sacredness, are brought into play. In the international NGO environmental movement, the relations between local and global concerns are established through single-issue networks or groups such as the International Rivers Network, the World Rainforest Movement, RAFI (now ETC), or through specific programmes and campaigns of confederations such as Friends of the Earth, or thanks to the help of global environmental organizations such as Greenpeace. OilWatch is a global network born of community struggles against oil and gas extraction, it provides south-south links among activist groups in tropical countries. Oilwatch has tried to link up local oil extraction conflicts with the global issue of climate change.

The fourth section considers the conflict between mangrove conservation and shrimp exports in different countries. Some organizations in the South have asked for northern consumers to boycott imports of farmed shrimp. This turns the tables on the (false) issue of northern "green protectionism". The mangrove forests are surrounded by shrimp growers. Shrimp production entails the loss of livelihood of people living directly from, and also selling, mangrove products. Other functions of mangroves are also lost, such as coastal defence against sea level rise,

breeding grounds for fish, carbon sinks, repositories of biodiversity, together with aesthetic values. Which languages of valuation are used by different agents in order to compare the increase in shrimp exports and the losses in livelihoods and in environmental services? Who has the power to impose a particular language of valuation?

The fifth section describes one conflict on tree plantations in Costa Rica, one of many conflicts caused by the growth of wood and paper pulp exports from the South. The slogan that sums up the resistance against such trend is "plantations are not forests". Plantation forests are not true forests. Many of the ecological and livelihood functions of the forest are lost, and poor people tend to complain accordingly. In the sixth section, gold and copper mining conflicts are described, mainly in Peru and in Papua New Guinea, both historical and contemporary. In some cases (such as Tambo Grande in Peru and Intag in Ecuador) the resistance to mining has been successful, and it has given rise to alternative development projects. Both in oil and mining conflicts, issues of corporate accountability and liability, compensation for damages under the Alien Torts Claims Act, procedures for project evaluation and decision making, are considered.

The final section summarizes the main features of the environmentalism of the poor as an environmentalism of livelihood concerned not only with economic security in the market sphere but also concerned with non-market access to environmental resources and services. This section includes a brief discussion on the role of women in ecological distribution conflicts. At the international level, the notion of the "ecological debt" from North to South (including the "carbon debt") is explained. New policy proposals in the areas of International Trade, Corporate Accountability, Climate Change, and Agriculture are submitted, based on the ideas growing out of the worldwide movement for environmental justice.

Introduction

Environmental preservation and protection have been understood as desires, which could develop only after the material necessities of life were already abundantly covered. The movement for Environmental Justice in the United States (and also in South Africa) and the wider and more diffuse worldwide movement of the environmentalism of the poor have bankrupted this view, which was prevalent until recently. The clash between economy and environment (which is studied by ecological economics) does not manifest itself only in the attacks on remaining pristine Nature but also in the increasing demands for raw materials and for sinks for waste in the large parts of the planet inhabited by humans, and in the planet as a whole. The fact that raw materials are cheap and that sinks have a zero price, is not a sign of abundance but a result of a given distribution of property rights, power and income. The environmental load of the economy, driven by consumption and by population growth, is growing all the time even when the economy (measured in money terms) is based on the service sector. Some impacts may decrease at some geographical scales, but then other impacts appear at other scales, with the resulting social conflicts. For instance, reduction of global carbon dioxide emissions may be obtained through local nuclear or hydroelectric energy projects, or by absorption of carbon dioxide through controversial local tree plantations. For instance, environmental improvements in some nations might occur because of the displacement of pollution to other nations. The case for a general "win-win" solution (better environment with economic growth) is far from proven. On the contrary, since the economy is not "dematerializing" in per capita terms, there are increasing local and global conflicts on the sharing of the burdens of pollution (including the enhanced greenhouse effect), and on the access to natural resources. Therefore, this report differs from the mainstream "eco-efficiency" approach. It emphasizes instead ecological distribution conflicts, and it studies the languages of valuation used in such conflicts.

In economic theories of production and consumption, compensation and substitution reign supreme. Not so in ecological economics, where diverse standards of value are deployed "to take Nature into account". In the ecological economics theory of consumption, no other good can substitute or compensate for the minimum amount of endosomatic energy essential for human livelihood. This does not imply a biological view of human needs, on the contrary, the human species exhibits enormous intra-specific socially caused differences in the use of exosomatic energy (to use Lotka's term). To call either the endosomatic consumption of 1,500 or 2,000 kilocalories (kcal) or the exosomatic use of 100,000 or 200,000 kcal per person/day a "socially constructed need, or want" would leave aside the ecological explanations or implications of such use of energy. And to call the daily endosomatic consumption of 1,500 or 2,000 kcal a "revealed preference" would betray the conventional economist's metaphysical viewpoint.

Production may become less intensive in terms of energy and materials, but the environmental load of the economy is driven by consumption. Rich citizens may choose to satisfy their needs or wants by new patterns of consumption that are themselves highly resource-intensive, such as the fashion for eating shrimp imported from tropical countries at the expense of mangrove destruction, or the use of gold. The approach of ecological economics, as pointed out by Gowdy in 1992, builds upon Georgescu-Roegen's "principle of irreducibility of needs". According to Max-Neef, all humans have the same needs, described as subsistence, affection, protection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom; and there is no generalized principle of substitution among them. Such needs can be satisfied by a variety of "satisfactors". One may ask why people travel so much, or why so houses are built with new materials instead of restoring old ones or recycling materials, etc. Research by Jackson and Marks (1999) on the trend to use "satisfactors" that are increasingly intensive in energy and materials to satisfy predominantly non-material needs has found that the expectations that an economy that has less industry will be less resource intensive, are premature.

In this report, only a few of these ecological distribution conflicts (i.e. conflicts on the access to natural resources or on the burdens of pollution) will be described.[1] The conclusion is reached that there is considerable activism around the world centred on environmental justice, not yet aware of its own potential strength as a global movement. It is composed of a multitude of individual groups, sometimes linked by issue-oriented international networks. The last section addresses some international new policies that would be consistent with the potential strength of this environmentalism of the poor.

Biopiracy, Farmers' Rights, and New Peasant Movements

In the "centres of agricultural diversity" (for instance, the Andes for the potato, Meso-America for maize), named after the Russian geneticist Vavilov, there has been over the last thousands of years a large amount of experimentation by peasants (women and men) in order to produce the hundreds and thousand of varieties adapted to the different conditions. These varieties have been shared freely. In India, as Kothari puts it (1998:51), a single species of rice (*Oryza sativa*) collected from the wild some time in the distant past, has diversified into approximately 50,000 varieties as a result of a combination of evolutionary/habitat influences and the innovative skills of farmers. This contribution to genetic diversity is a fact that the modern seed industry conveniently sidesteps, and that the consumers ignore. Agricultural biopiracy is a topic that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been discussing for twenty years under the name of Farmers' Rights. Some governments from developing countries say that "if a company takes a seed from a farmer field, adds a gene and patents the resulting seed for sale at a profit [or otherwise "improves" the seed by traditional methods of crossing, and then protects it under the UPOV rules], there is no reason the initial seed should be free. They also say patents ignore the contributions by indigenous peoples, who often are the true discoverers of useful plants and animals, or of farmers who improve plants over the generations. The negotiation run by the Food and Agriculture Organization [on Farmers' Rights] is weighing whether to compensate traditional farmers for work on improving crops and maintaining different varieties. Malaysia has proposed an international fund of $3 billion but the United States opposes it" (Pollack 1999). Notice that US$3 billion, not as a fund but as a yearly contribution, would represent not more than approximately 2 dollars per member of the still existing peasant families in the world today, too little as an incentive to continue with their task of in situ conservation and coevolution of seeds. Twenty dollars could start to make a difference, if they would reach the grass roots. But, then, who wants the Third World farmers to continue growing and locally freely sharing or selling their own low-yielding, low-input seeds? From the point of view of international capitalism, would it not be more conducive to economic growth to replace their seeds by commercially produced seeds? A new commodity, the seed, would definitively leave the sphere of oikonomia to enter into chrematistics, moreover yields would be larger, and more commercial inputs would be required. Should not traditional seeds be really be forbidden, as they are forbidden in developed countries on grounds of lack of sanitary