

FACTS

against

MYTHS

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INFORMATION BULLETIN

COMMENT

Environmental-Population Myths

In the on-going North-South debate, so many myths have been generated that place the blame for the destruction of the environment and depletion of resources on the people of the South. Much of this debate, on environment and population, is mired in a sterile effort to find an obvious and convincing scapegoat on which to peg the blame for the myriad of problems confronting our planet: deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, ozone depletion,

It has become fashionable and even respectable to point the accusing finger at the "monstrous" juggernaut -- population growth in the South -- the root cause of each and every problem confronting the globe. It is considered a threat to sustainability because if consumption levels of the North are linked to it, global resource requirement would become exceedingly large.

Unlimited population growth do put a severe strain on the resources and the 'carrying capacity' of the earth. It is however fallacious to conclude that population growth 'per se' is the main culprit. The rise in human numbers is not a 'sui generis' phenomenon but rather the result of the particular social, economic, ecological and political dynamics of society. Population size and its rate of growth in any society is a function of its underlying socio-cultural and economic reality. Any serious effort, therefore, in "controlling" the "population explosion" must begin by recognising this and other related facts instead of just stressing population figures which is only one aspect of the whole debate. When the issue is linked with the environment in general and resources in particular, both the quantity and quality aspects need to be examined. Any attempt therefore in analysing and solving this issue through the reduction of human numbers will have to go

beyond the simplistic numbers game .

Undeniably, there is urgent need for development, in eradicating poverty as also curbing population growth. Such development however needs to be sustainable. Production of goods and services require resources and often generates certain undesirable joint-products along with desired goods and services. Ultimately, however, it is the production process that generates the particular consumption pattern. Stress has therefore to be on the type of production-consumption patterns, their resource contents and their environmental consequences. The solution to the whole environment crisis therefore does not lie in controlling population growth but in the social control of production-consumption patterns of the rich in the North..

MYTH

Population Growth Is Responsible For The Worldwide Environmental Degradation.

FACT

The point of poverty and population growth being the cause of environment degradation is patently false. There is no evidence from anywhere to suggest that poverty causes degradation and that high population causes poverty. In reality it is the structural inequality and erosion of access to natural resources that accentuates poverty. History clearly shows that population growth and incidence of poverty are inter-connected. Once interventions aimed at eradicating poverty begin to succeed there is significant impact on the rate of population growth. Hence, poverty is not a cause of, but consequence of, environmental degradation and investments in human resource along with equitable access to natural resources, can avert these trends.

The main issue therefore is not population growth. Wasteful and unnecessary consumption is the main culprit. To this, the barb that "all these people" in the South will eat up all the resources is a racist underlying reaction. If one person in the North consumes 8 times more than a person in the South, there would be fewer people in the North! For each person cut down in the North, consumption comes down by 8 times.

The production-consumption processes linkage is therefore the main issue. The North, especially the U.S., argue that consumption is a personal matter. It is a matter of personal choice and (individual) rights, and that the State cannot intervene with consumption. Yet, at international fora they maintain that population control is something that the State should enforce! So, where is human rights and respect for people of the South? Consumption is a personal right, but how many children a family should have, what they wish to do with their bodies is international and World Bank policy?! That itself is a basic contradiction.

Consumption levels therefore of the rich North constitute a major threat to the environment. The North has only 24 per cent of the world's population, but their share in global consumption of various commodities extends from 50 to 90 percent. Even basic products like cereals, milk and meat are consumed by industrialized countries in a range from 48 percent to 72 percent. Its consumption share for other products are 60 percent for fertilizers, 81 percent for iron and steel, 85 percent for chemicals and 92 percent for cars. This also means that their per capita consumption is three to eight times that of the South for items of basic needs and more than 20 times for chemicals and vehicles. The North's world's share of energy consumption is 75 percent.

Obviously, environmental degradation is proportional to these consumption levels. The North has been responsible from 1950 to 1988 for about 70 percent of the annual emissions of carbon dioxide and 77 percent of cumulative carbon dioxide emissions. The per capita carbon emissions of the rich North are seven times that of the South.

In terms of global food (meat) consumption, the North gets 40% of the calories from fat. These 1.25 billion people eat 3 times as much fat per person as the rest of 4 billion. Indirectly the meat eating quarter of humanity consumes nearly 40% of world's grain -- grain that fattens the livestock they eat. Meat production is behind the major part of the environmental stress induced by the present global agricultural systems, from soil erosion to over-pumping of underground water. In the extreme case of American beef, production of 1 kg of steak requires 5 kg of grain and the energy equivalent of 9 litres of petrol, apart from soil erosion, water consumption, pesticide and fertiliser runoff, ground water depletion, and emission of green house methane.

Beyond the effects of livestock production, the affluent diet rings up an ecological bill through its heavy dependence on long distance transport. North Europeans eat lettuce trucked from Greece and decorate the tables with flowers from Kenya. Japanese eat turkey from the US and ostrich from Australia. One fourth

of the grapes eaten in the US is grown in Chile, 11000 km away. This far-flung agri-business food system is only partly a product of agronomic forces. It is also a result of farm policies and health standards that favour large producers, massive government subsidies for western irrigation water, and a national highway system that makes trucking economical by transferring the tax burden from truckers to the highway users.

In raw material the consumption the same pattern emerges. About 1 billion rural people subsist on the local biomass collected from the immediate environment. Most of what they use each could be self-replenishing renewal resources. Unfortunately, because they are often pushed by landlessness and population growth into fragile, unproductive ecosystems, their basic needs are hardly met.

In terms of consumer expenditure, 4% of goods in the U.S. covers packaging, i.e. \$225 a year. Packaging, in this throw-away of economy, is an end in itself. Disposables proliferate at an incredible rate. Likewise the Japanese use 30 million "disposable" single-roll cameras each year, and the British dump 2.6 billion diapers. Americans toss away 180 million razors annually, enough paper and plastic plates and cup to feed the world a picnic 6 times a year and enough aluminium cans to make 6000 DC10 air-crafts.

In the context of population figures what it is of greater relevance and even more revealing is the concept of Consumption-or Pollution-Multiplied Population (CMP,PMP). An average American consumes over 20 times the resources of the average person in the South. The US population of 250 million multiplied by 20 gives a CMP of five billion, compared to the total population of 4 billion of the South, giving a CMP of 4 billion.

The consumption of paper in the US is 137 times that of India. The paper PMP, then is 34 billion compared to 850 million for India. Similarly, a Japanese earns at least 120 times more income than an average Nepali worker. The impact of all this alone on deforestation is evident.

If one calculates the CMP or PMP -- in relation to the consumption rates of the poor themselves -- rather than on the basis of national averages, the results are more glaring. Since neither cars nor CFCs are used by them, the CMP and PMP for these commodities approaches infinity for any of the countries of the North.

Further, assuming that a person, from the rich North consumes 50 times more resources (which s/he easily does) than an average person from the South, then the effective population of Germany would be over 4000 million (its actual population being around 80 million) and the US would be over 12,400 (its actual population being around 250 million) in terms of consumption.

Thus consumption patterns of the rich North including those of the rich in the South is significant not only by its quantitative implications, but by its qualitative character too. It is the insatiable desires for ever increasing material comforts of the economically affluent -- i.e., their mass consumption life styles and consumption patterns -- that lead to severe degradation of the environment and depletion of resources.

MYTH

The Poor Of The South Are Destroying The Forests And The Environment At Large.

FACT

Development agencies, including the FAO, the World Bank, among others, all tend to view the poor as primary factor in the ecological crisis. But like the Agenda 21 they all fail to explain why poverty exists in the first place, and thus fail adequately to examine contemporary economic structures and the role, for instance that timber companies, ranching syndicates and TNCs have had both in creating and maintaining social inequalities in the degradation of the environment.

Evidently, the destruction and degradation of the forests in the world stem not only from the present economic system but also in the nexus between the political elites of the South and Western corporate

interests. In regions where privilege, inequality and subsequent poverty are rife, and where repressive regimes are continually supported by the American administration, TNCs virtually have a free hand in implementing 'development' projects that are causing widespread forest destruction. The economic benefits of those projects goes to the importing countries (the North) and to wealthy elites within the South, not to the people of the forested regions who become even more pauperized. To illustrate, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Union Finance Minister, on June 17, 1992 delivered the Foundation Day Lecture of the Society for the Promotion of Wasteland Development on the theme, "Environment and New Economic Policies". Apart from "poverty" and the "lack of development" he also stressed the "uncontrolled economic development" as the other factor to the economic crisis.

If the current 'regulated' model of development is causing "uncontrolled" mining of the country's natural resource base (e.g. at Palamau in Bihar, Kota in Rajasthan, etc.,) then this devastation is bound to increase in geometric progression with the advent of the new 'De-regulated' economic policy.

He further stated that, "The survival strategies of the poor, particularly their search for food, fodder, fuel and shelter, often leads to over utilization of available resources, thereby accentuating the problem of environmental degradation".

It is an over statement that the survival strategy of the poor that lead to over utilisation of available natural resources and erosion, thereby of our natural resource base. Infact, it is the centralized policy of the Government to use the country's forest resources as a main revenue earner which causes this erosion. It is the forest department which claims the ownership of one-fourth of the country's total landmark. And finally, it is the state (controlling and developing India's forests, dams, hydel power stations, mines, roads and large part of its industry) which is not just the protector but also the most feared destroyer of our country's environment. And, lest we forget, the adivasis of Bastar -- like most adivasis the world over -- had protected their forest over centuries.

A World Bank project for so-called forest development, of tropical pines here, became a major cause for deforestation in the region. This project came to India as the Bank's Group's first intervention in Forestry, the Madhya Pradesh Forestry Technical Assistance Project (Credit 608 - IN, December 1975) and was directed primarily towards the development of plantation for pulp and paper industry. This project was part of the trend to totally convert natural forests to commercial plantation resulting in the biomass produced no longer benefiting the adivasis. The adivasis sustenance base in cane and bamboo for basket weaving, mangoes, tamarind, jack fruit, mahua and edible berries were all destroyed when natural forests were replaced by monoculture plantation of tropical pine. These trees were worse than useless for local needs. They provide no food or fodder. Villagers cannot use them for thatching. Above all these trees absorb huge quantities of water and put toxin into the soil. In surrounding farmland, wells and streams dry up and crops cannot grow. In Karnataka alone, 75,000 hectares of agricultural land have been destroyed by eucalyptus.

The Karnataka Pulpwood Limited, a joint-sector company owned by the Karnataka Government and Harihar Polyfibres of the Birlas has been given the above acreage of revenue land, forest lands and common lands in six districts of the State for captive plantation of these trees and other fast growing species for the benefit of the Limited Company. This has led to over 5 lakh people being deprived of their essential needs like fodder, fuel, small, timber, manure, raw material and fruits.

Quote

*Take Care Of The People And The "Population Problem" Will
Take Care Of Itself.-- UNPF*

MYTH

The Structural Adjustment Programme Will Set Right The Problems Of The Environment, Etc.

FACT

To begin with, for the poor in the South, environment is a necessary survival base, not a luxury or of any aesthetic value. Forests, grasslands, rivers, have been the source of life and livelihood for adivasis, nomads and fisherfolk. This background is necessary to bear in mind, for instance, in trying to understand current economic issues especially in the context of the Government liberalising the economy and subsequently ratifying the Dunkel Draft proposals. The mounting debt burden and widening trade deficits are being given as reasons for recent cuts in tariffs, easing of curbs on foreign investors, removal of restrictions on imports and removal of subsidies. "Export or Perish" is the message that Government has been repeating from all fora.

The boost to export for earning foreign exchange will mean an even greater pressure on our natural resources. More and more of these resources would be directed to tradeable items rather than for local consumption. Already, over 60 percent of the exports are natural resource based. These depend heavily on primary commodities such as coffee, jute, timber, marine products, ores and minerals. Since the social and environmental costs are not covered in the price of exports, such tilt towards liberalized trade will push the country to an indiscriminate exploitation of these resources.

With the definite possibility of the Dunkel proposals taking effect, global competition for agricultural output will intensify forcing to bring more and more prime land under cultivation to step up production for exports. Increasing production would mean greater use of chemicals, pesticides, clearing more forests and opening up hitherto protected stretches of land for enhancing exports. With farmers being called upon to earn foreign exchange, massive shift to cash crop production is certain, drastically reducing areas for staple food cultivation. Small and marginal farmers, lacking resources to take to export-oriented production, would be pushed out of agriculture losing out to agri-business interests. Among the several proposals cleared for foreign investments, large number of these relate to food processing.

The elevation of agriculture to the status of industry would displace small farmers, many of whom would be compelled to encroach forest areas leading to further deforestation. Export-oriented agriculture, being capital intensive, will not be able to absorb the new entrants to labour force, many of whom would then swell the ranks of the poor in urban slums. Ensuring implementation of environmental and safety safeguards will become more difficult in pressurizing industries to ensure that they do not violate safety standards. With SAP leading to the domination of more and more areas of industrial development by TNCs, the chances of ensuring social safeguards are likely to be reduced, specially at a time when there is further effort to shift more hazardous and polluted industries away from the developed countries as openly advocated by a senior World Bank official. The situation of relatively less safety regulations here is evident from the recent discourses that carbaryl pesticide is still being formulated in Bhopal.

With the inflow of foreign investment gradually increasing it is unlikely that this investment will be carefully monitored from the angle of avoiding unacceptable risks to environmental ruin and various hazards. This is because the government is so anxious to attract foreign investors that it is unlikely to pester them too much by questions about the environment and safety position of their ventures.

There is also a tremendous pressure to utilise the pending aid at a rapid pace. Piled up unutilized aid brings adverse publicity for the borrowing country in the aid bazaar and so there is great pressure to rush up the utilization of this aid. One reason for the delay of the projects is the preview in the acquisition of land on which people are already living/working and the possibilities of other adverse effects. Now in the name of speeding up the utilization of this aid, problems of the people facing eviction and related environmental problems are likely to be given a short shrift, specially in the situation when foreign investors and donors

are anxious to push some hazardous projects.

SAP gives a call for making the maximum effort to increase exports. A lot of things can be excused if a project happens to be favorable from the point of increasing exports. Hence the havoc that may be caused to land, water and air resources by such projects is likely to be tolerated.

Efforts to increase marine exports, other food exports and also the products of some high polluting/hazardous industries can cause very extensive damage to the environment. Some of the mega-projects which are most controversial from the point of environmental side effects, the environmental efforts run the risks of being created as a non-priority area and thereby subjected to heavy budget cuts. For instance in a recent paper by Miloon Kothari and Ashish Kothari, "Allocation for the prevention and control of pollution have been out (in real terms) by 35.5 per cent at a time when pollution is likely to increase. Rural sanitation programmes have suffered a cut of 46.8 per cent and the rural water supply of the water mission 39.3 per cent of its budget. Other programmes which have suffered are wasteland development (down by 23.5 percent) and promotion of non-conventional energy sources (26.3 percent) but the heaviest reduction (61 percent) is in the biomass development programme."

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NOTE : Inadvertantly an error, on abortion in Islam (Pg. 2) appeared in the last issue. It was incorrectly stated that Islam like the Catholic Church prohibits abortion. The fact is that in Islam abortion is prohibited after 120 days except to save mother's health.

Facts Against Myths is a monthly bulletin of factual information on a number of development myths and fallacies, etc., including information against disinformation campaigns, propaganda and canards spread by communal and fundamentalist forces.

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