



Linking Poverty to Environmental Sustainability

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Why link Poverty and Environment?

Poverty and environment are inter-linked through four main dimensions: **livelihoods**, **resilience** to environmental risks, **health** and **economic development**.

Livelihoods: Ecosystems -- a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their nonliving environment interacting as a functional unit -- provide goods and services (e.g. food, clean water, energy and shelter) on which poor people rely disproportionately for their well-being and basic needs. They also depend on the environment to earn incomes in sectors such as agriculture, fishing, forestry and tourism, both in formal and informal markets.

Resilience to environmental risks: Poor people are more vulnerable to natural disasters (e.g. flooding, drought), the effects of climate change, and environmental shocks that threaten among others their livelihoods and undermine food security. Improving environmental management of for example watersheds and mangrove forests increase the resilience of poor people and their livelihoods to environmental risks.

Health: Environmental conditions account for a significant portion of health risks to poor people. On the other hand, good health conditions are beneficial in terms of resilience, livelihoods, productivity and economic development.

Economic development: The environment contributes directly and indirectly to the economic development and level of employment, in particular in developing countries, through sectors such as agriculture, energy, forestry, fisheries, and tourism.

Poverty environment linkages are dynamic and context specific reflecting both geographic location, scale and the economic, social, and cultural characteristics of individuals, households, and social groups. By addressing the environmental issues it is possible for developing countries to ensure a sustainable path to poverty reduction and human development. .

Examples of poverty-environment issues include soil degradation that affects nearly 2 billion hectares, damaging the livelihoods of up to 1 billion people living on drylands. Around 70% of commercial fisheries are either fully or overexploited, and 1.7 billion people -- a third of the developing world's population -- live in countries facing water stress.

There is an uneven geography of consumption, environmental damage and human impact. Rich countries generate most of the world's environmental pollution and deplete many of its natural resources. Key examples include depletion of the world's fisheries and emissions of greenhouse gases that cause climate change, both of which are tied to unsustainable consumption patterns by rich people and countries. In rich countries per capita carbon dioxide emissions are 12.4 tonnes while in middle-income countries they are 3.2 tonnes and in low-income countries, 1.0 tonne. Poor people are most vulnerable to environmental shocks and stresses such as the anticipated impacts of global climate change.

Global consensus on linking Poverty and Environment

In 2000, over 189 developing and developed countries adopted the Millennium Declaration that re-affirmed their commitment to strengthening global efforts for peace, human rights, democracy, strong governance, environmental sustainability and poverty eradication. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), made up of 8 Goals, 18 targets and 48 indicators to be achieved by 2015 are the road map to achieving the Declarations commitments. These MDGs reflect key aims of various UN development conferences in the 1990s including the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992). As such, the MDGs are the product of many national, regional and international consultations that involved millions of people and represented a wide range of interests, including those of governments, civil society organizations and private sector actors.

For the MDGs and other multilateral environment agreements to be achieved, they must become a national reality. These agreements set out benchmarks for assessing progress and for enabling poor people to hold political leaders accountable for the implementation of relevant national policies and interventions at national, sector and local level. Ensuring environmental sustainability—the seventh Millennium Development Goal—requires achieving sustainable development patterns and preserving the productive capacity of natural ecosystems for future generations. Both efforts in turn require a variety of national policies that reverse environmental damage and improve ecosystem management. The challenge has two dimensions: addressing natural resource scarcity for the world’s poor people and reversing environmental damage resulting from high consumption by rich people.

Integrating Poverty and Environment in National Development

Ensuring environmental sustainability requires managing ecosystems so that they can provide services that sustain human livelihoods. This is also an important part of reaching the other global and national development goals. As such the work that we do through the UNDP/UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI)¹ is instrumental in helping national government to integrate poverty and environmental issues in national development planning processes. There are currently ongoing PEI programs in Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Reversing the current negative trends in the environment as demonstrated in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Reports and GEO 4 (UNEP, 2007) contributes to the achievement of poverty reduction because the health, incomes and opportunities of poor people are heavily influenced by the depletion of natural resources. The Millennium Development Compact (UNDP Human Development Report, 2003) proposes combined and complementary efforts from developed and developing countries, international agencies, local authorities, private actors and civil society organizations to help poor countries achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The policy priorities for improved environmental sustainability include:

- **Improving institutions and governance:** Clearly define property and user rights, improve monitoring and compliance with environmental standards and involve communities in managing their environmental resources.
- **Addressing environmental protection and management** in each country’s sector policies and other development strategies.
- **Improving the functioning of markets.** Remove subsidies, especially in rich countries, that damage the environment (such as subsidies for fossil fuels or large-scale commercial fishing fleets), and reflect environmental costs through pollution charges.
- **Strengthening international mechanisms.** Improve international management of global issues such as protecting international watersheds and reversing climate change, together with mechanisms to share these burdens equitably.
- **Investing in science and technology.** Invest more in renewable energy technologies and create an observatory to monitor the functioning and state of major ecosystems.
- **Conserving critical ecosystems.** Create protected areas with the involvement of local people.

Over 41 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have prepared national development strategies aligned to the MDGs and other development goals agreed upon through the United Nations. These countries have demonstrated that rapid and large-scale progress towards the MDGs is possible when strong government leadership and policies and strategies that effectively target the needs of the poor are combined with adequate financial and technical support from the international community. In particular, the UN Millennium Development Goals Report (2007) highlights impressive achievements in areas such as raising agricultural productivity (in Malawi, for example), boosting primary school enrolment (as in Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania), controlling malaria (as in Niger, Togo, Zambia, Zanzibar), widening access to basic rural health services (Zambia), reforesting areas on a large scale (Niger), and increasing access to water and sanitation (Senegal and Uganda). These practical successes now need to be replicated and scaled-up.

¹ For more information about the poverty and environment initiative visit www.unpei.org