

Julia Marton-Lefèvre

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Nature, not aid?¹

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Abstract. Nature is a source of solutions to many of the pressing challenges of development, from food security to climate change. Illustrations of this claim are increasing around the world, and the figures supporting it are now beyond dispute; they demonstrate just how closely dependent our societies are on nature and natural resources. Development actors – both international development aid organizations and donor governments – and nature conservation bodies have, however, not yet managed to find the right common denominator to link environmental issues definitively and irreversibly with those of human development. These two communities must redouble their joint efforts in the immediate future, in order to save nature and mankind.

Keywords. Nature, development, solutions, security, societies, development aid, nature conservation, common denominator, humanitarian disaster.

Nature is the vital foundation that makes life on our planet possible and indeed sustains it. Food, water, medicine, shelter, unpolluted air: all of these products and services – and many others on which life depends – come from nature. We all owe our survival to its countless benefits, and this is true especially in the case of poorer populations.

However, the international development aid organizations and donor governments have largely overlooked the role of nature, turning instead to large-scale “development” programmes, to help countries out of poverty. Some of these programmes are environmentally damaging; in other cases, give counterproductive results.

Nature conservationists have failed to persuade economists and development practitioners of the long-term importance of the environment for development. When asked to provide proof that nature makes a tangible contribution to human welfare, they have all too often found it difficult to make their case.

But this is all changing.

Recent research by IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) demonstrates that forests, for example, provide 130 billion dollars’ worth of direct and tangible benefits for 1.6 billion of the world’s poorest people – more than the total cumulative aid from donor countries!

Meanwhile, a revolutionary study, *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*, shows that natural ecosystems such as wetlands, coral reefs and forests represent up to

89% of what has come to be called “the GDP of the poor”, namely the means of existence of poor populations. In Burkina Faso, for instance, an IUCN project backed by the French government has revealed that 80% of the incomes of poor households are linked to the protected forest of Nazinga.

Some countries are starting to give the issue serious attention.

Rwanda is a case in point, having recently launched a nationwide initiative to reverse – by 2035 – the current trend toward the degradation of its soil, water, land and forestry resources. IUCN has been closely associated with its implementation, and will continue to support the Rwandan government in making the environment a key driver in the country’s development.

This approach requires a major change in the existing economic model, which gives primacy to GDP; in particular it calls for new tools for measuring the wealth and well-being of nations.

A number of “megadiverse” countries such as India have already begun to lead the way: they are adapting their economies to be more respectful of the environment and to give greater recognition to the services of nature in their national accounts.

It is not only enough to invest more in nature, we must also invest wisely. Development aid must be restructured to eliminate the long-standing discriminatory barriers that prevent equitable sharing of nature’s benefits, to uphold the rights of those who make the greatest contribution to preserving natural assets, and to support them in their task of managing those assets sustainably.

When all of this is in place, the benefits – both for human populations and for nature – are greatly amplified. In Bangladesh, 1,200 families – once they had been given greater involvement and greater influence on local fisheries management – succeeded in obtaining a tenfold increase in the compensation paid by the government for the closed fishing

¹“Trade not aid” has been a popular slogan in the development sector for decades. But has the time come to say “nature, not aid?” To combat poverty, we must invest in nature, declared IUCN Director General Julia Marton-Lefèvre at the conclusion of the international conference on poverty and the environment held in Paris in July 2011.

season, thereby increasing family incomes and at the same time improving the sustainability of the resources.

It is also time for us to look again at what we invest in. Local voluntary groups, small or medium-sized enterprises, and areas protected by local and indigenous communities are closer to the realities on the ground, and often have lower transaction costs and offer better returns on investment.

Following the independence of Namibia, its government sought to ensure equal rights for local populations by officially registering the local community conservation areas. There are now 59 conservation areas covering almost 130,000 square km of unspoiled natural habitat, rich in wild species and employing some 800 full-time and 250 seasonal staff.

Rare and threatened species, such as the black rhinoceros, are sometimes transferred to these sites from the national parks; a clear sign of the authorities' confidence in the ability of local communities to manage natural resources. Ecologists from very different parts of the world – from the Mongolian steppes to the forests of Ghana and the Great Plains of North America – are now looking to Namibia, to identify good practices that can be applied in their own countries.

In light of the current financial crisis, many governments are closely reexamining their budgets and priorities. However, the crisis is also an opportunity to rethink development aid.

With “trade, not aid”, we ultimately recognized that both are necessary. The same applies to “nature, not aid” for sustainable development: we are realizing that nature can offer solutions for a number of urgent development issues, from food security to climate change.

We have less than five years left to meet the global target set by the United Nations of halving the number of people who live in extreme poverty, and less than ten to fulfill another global objective: halting the loss of biological diversity. If we are to succeed, we must show even greater inventiveness, cooperation and determination to lead the way.

The time has come to recognize nature for what it really is: a judicious investment and a vital opportunity to bring about a lasting reduction in poverty. The time has come for development and conservation actors to join forces and ensure that these objectives are fulfilled.