

# ENVIRONMENT AND POVERTY: ONE WORLD OR TWO?<sup>1</sup>

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## 1

A decade and a half ago Al Gore wrote his engaging and important book, Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit<sup>2</sup>. In analysing the growing environmental predicament of the world, Gore presented a good deal of evidential data to argue that or abuse of nature is right now “threatening to push the earth out of balance”. He went on to propose an enormous global attempt at countering the growing adversities – what he called “a global Marshall Plan”. Gore’s concerns are now available, in a picturesque form, as a gripping film, and this may communicate even to those who watch but do not read.

Gore’s contribution was rather unusual in several different ways. First, this was one of the rare examples of a serious attempt by a leading politician of a tremendously powerful country. Gore was Vice President of the United States and nearly became President of the US but for some complex – and somewhat exasperating – vote counting incidents of a kind that would have ashamed Indians had it happened in one of our elections. But even without the Presidentship, Gore was a top leader of the lone superpower in the world today, and it was remarkable that he did try very seriously to address the environmental problems of the world and suggested positive counteracting policies.

The world leaders seem to have turned less activist, if not less concerned, since then. With very few exceptions, there is extraordinary inaction at the level of top leadership of the world. I fear the global leaders fully deserve the unflattering diagnosis presented by the retiring Secretary General of the United Nations – the great Kofi Annan – when he accused them of “a frightening lack of leadership” in dealing with such issues as global warming<sup>3</sup>.

Gore was unusual in another way as well. He attributed the environmental crisis of the world ultimately to our defective values. Revealing his basic diagnosis even in the sub-title of the book – Ecology and the Human Spirit – Gore argued that “to some, the global environmental crisis is primarily a crisis of values” (p. 242). That view led Gore to elaborate on the hypothesis that “the basic cause of the problem is that we as a civilization base our decisions about how to relate to the environment on premises that are fundamentally unethical.” In one way or another, we fail to take note of the effects of our actions on others – on the society at large and on those yet to be born – and we are disinclined to accept responsibility for our actions and their far-reaching consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Text of valedictory address delivered on 16 December 2006 in International Conference on Energy, Environment, and Development: Analysing Opportunities for Reducing Poverty, jointly organised by TERI (The Energy and Resources Institute), IVE (Veolia Environment Institute), and IDDRI (Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations), in Bangalore, India.

<sup>2</sup> Al Gore, Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> “Annan Faults ‘Frightening Lack of Leadership’ for Global Warming,” The New York Times, November 16, 2006.

Indeed, Gore did not even stop there, but went on to invoke the role of faith, confirming the current American passion for faith. In concluding his moving book, Gore argued that “the place to start with is faith” (p. 367). The book ends with a resounding endorsement of Aristotle’s famously ambiguous assertion that “virtue is one thing,” indicating that Gore understands what exactly Aristotle meant (something that has eluded classical scholars over thousands of years). Gore’s ultimate optimism comes evidently from his own faith that “the image of the Creator” which “sometimes seems so faint”, is “nonetheless present in its entirety – and present in us as well” (p. 265).

That is powerful stuff – for those who are moved by that kind of invocation. But faith in some grand creator who is also a great preserver is not the only issue to concentrate of here. It is rather the broader focus on values in general – of theists and atheists, of the religious and the secular, of the ignited and the collected – that can perhaps communicate more easily and more effectively to everyone in the world concerned about the problems that the world faces today. His pointer to the extraordinary contrast between “the awesome power and efficiency of our economic system” and “the abject failure of the very same system to even take note of the poisoning of our water, the fouling of our air, the destruction of tens of thousands of living species every year” (p. 185) certainly stands with our without any transcendental faith. There is a hugely important problem here, to which Gore draws sharp attention, and which needs to be addressed, even if we do not share Gore’s conviction that “the place to start with is faith” and the American invoking of God to help solve every earthly problem.

The failure of the values involved has many aspects. One of them is the lack of individual incentive to do the right thing for preserving the environment and our lives that depend on it, when the nature of the economy and that of our societies make people act on the basis of different priorities. This was the dimension of the crisis of values of which, happily, Al Gore himself concentrated. While economists may or may not immediately warm to the idea that people’s values can be changed through reflection (I am closer here to Gore than most economists I know), they would tend to agree that we need some societal action, some institutional intervention, to deal with the biases of self-centred economic incentives that characterize the pure market economy. Whether it be carbon taxes, or emissions regulations, or enhancement of recycling facilities – there are a whole lot of other things that have been discussed by the profession seriously enough and which can be put into practice if we have the political commitment to do so. There is a willingness on the part of most economists concerned with practical matters in the world to examine and even to encourage these institutional and organisational proposals. The problem does not lie in economic analysis, but in political action.

## 2

However, the problem of values has another aspect as well, involving inequality, poverty and deprivation. Kofi Anna put his finger exactly on that in his speech in Nairobi last month from which I have already quoted. He argued, “the impact of climate change will fall disproportionately on the world’s poorest countries, here in Africa.” He went on to explain, “poor people already live on the front line of

pollution, disaster and the degradation of resources and land.” For them adaptation is a matter of sheer survival.” This focus on the poor brings us solidly into one of the most important connections -that between poverty and the environment - which deserve much greater attention right now. Central to this linkage is the question that I have tried to capture -very imperfectly I am afraid, for it is a hugely complex connection - in the title of my talk, "environment and poverty: two worlds or one?" (The blame for choice of topic, I should however point out is at least partly that of Rajindra Pachauri -who abetted and instigated me to go in that direction!)

It is important to see why and how the perspective of poverty has to be central to environmental and ecological thinking<sup>4</sup>. There is also the need for recognising the converse: why environmental issues are inescapable parts of the battle against poverty. The relationship of interdependence can be extended also to the concept of development in general, and there are good reasons to see development and ecology as mutually dependent ideas. It is this thesis of the “one world” that I intend to pursue some more here.

The strength -and even the existence -of that connection is often missed, and there has been a temptation in policy discussions to think of development and the preservation of the environments in antagonistic terms. Attention is often concentrated on the fact that many of the deteriorating environmental trends in the world are linked with heightened economic activity, such as industrial growth, increased energy consumption, more intensive irrigation, commercial felling of trees, and other such activities that tend to correlate with economic expansion. Indeed, at a superficial level, it may well appear that economic development is responsible for environmental damage. Not surprisingly, a number of well-known works in , environmental studies, such as the famous monograph Limits to Growth, by Meadows et al, have tended to blame economic - development in general, and economic -growth in particular, as ecological hazards. There is certainly a superficially plausible reasoning there.

On the other side, similarly, environmental activists are frequently accused by development enthusiasts of being “anti- development” since environmental activism is often taken to be unwelcoming to processes that can raise incomes and reduce poverty (because of their allegedly unfavourable environmental impact).

The battle lines may not be very sharply drawn, but it is hard to escape the sense of tension that does exist, in varying degrees, between the champions of poverty reduction and economic development, on one side, and the advocates of ecology and environmental preservation, on the other.

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This extraordinarily confrontational view is I believe, fundamentally erroneous and misconceived. This becomes particularly clear if one sees development in adequately broad terms, seeing it foundationally as the expansion of human freedom. In this broader perspective, the assessment of development cannot be divorced from the lives

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<sup>4</sup> I have tried to discuss the connections involved on an earlier occasion, at a talk I was privileged to present at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Governing Council meeting of the United Nations Environment Programme in Nairobi in February 2003. I will draw on some of the arguments presented there.

that people can lead and the real freedoms that they can enjoy<sup>5</sup>. Development can scarcely be seen merely in terms of enhancement of inanimate objects of convenience, such as a rise in the GNP (or in personal incomes), or industrialisation, or technological advance, or social modernization. These are no doubt valuable - often critically important - accomplishments, but their value must depend on what they do to the lives and freedoms of the people involved. We have reason to distinguish between what, ultimately, we have reason to esteem and what we derivatively value as being helpful for what we have reason to esteem.

Economic opulence and substantive freedoms, while not unconnected, can diverge for a number of reasons. Even in terms of being free to live reasonably long lives (free of escapable ailments and other causes of premature mortality), it is remarkable that the extent of deprivation for particular groups in very rich countries can be comparable to that in the so-called “third world”. For example, in the United States, African Americans as a group, especially those in inner cities, have no higher – indeed have a lower-chance of reaching an advanced age than do people born in the immensely poorer economies of China or substantial parts of India (or Sri Lanka, Jamaica, or Costa Rica). The freedom from premature mortality is, of course, helped by a larger income (that is not in doubt), but it also depends on many other features of social organization, including public health care and medical insurance, the extent of social and economic inequality in the society, the quality of schooling and education, the nature of the social surrounding and the epidemiological environment, and so on. So it does matter how the ends of development are understood.

If we are ready to recognise the need for seeing the world in this broader perspective, it becomes immediately clear that development cannot be divorced from ecological and environmental concerns. For example, since we have reasons to value the freedom to lead a pollution-free life, the preservation of a pollution-free atmosphere must be an important part of the objectives of development. Seeing development as enhancement of human freedom involves diverse concerns, but incorporating expansion of social opportunities and the quality of life, which are integrally dependent on ecology and environmental preservation, must be among the central concerns in development thinking.

Indeed, important components of human freedoms – and crucial ingredients of our quality of life – are thoroughly dependent on the integrity of the environment, involving the air we breathe, the water we drink, the epidemiological surroundings in which we live, and so on. The opportunity to live the kind of lives that people value – and have reason to value – depend *inter alia* on the nature and robustness of the environment. In this sense, development has to be environment – inclusive, and the belief that development and environment are on a collision course cannot sit comfortably with the recognition of the manifest interdependence and complementarity between the two.

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<sup>5</sup> I have tried to argue for that perspective in my book Development as Freedom (New York: Knopf, and London and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

It is, however, important to see that the relations work in both directions. Focusing on the quality of life can help to generate a necessary understanding not only of development, but also of the nature of the environment and the extensive characteristics of what we can call an environmental issue. The environment is sometimes seen – I believe over-simply – as the state of “nature,” including such measures as the extent of forest cover, the depth of the ground water table, the number of living species, and so on. To the extent that it is assumed that this pre-existing nature will stay intact unless we add impurities and pollutants to it, it might, therefore, appear superficially plausible that environment is best protected if we interfere with it as little as possible. This understanding is, however, deeply defective for two extremely important reasons.

First, the value of environment cannot be just a matter of what there is, but also of what opportunities they actually offer. The impact of the environment on human lives must inter alia be among the relevant considerations in assessing the richness of the environment. To take an extreme example, in understanding why the eradication of small pox is not viewed as an impoverishment of nature (“the environment is poorer since small pox viruses have disappeared!”), in the way, say, the destruction of useful and lovely forests would be, the connection with lives in general and human lives in particular has to be brought into the understanding. Given that inescapable connection, the assessment of the environment cannot but be dependent on many other features of our lives, which in turn are thoroughly dependent on the process of development.

It is, therefore, not surprising that environmental sustainability has typically been defined in terms of preservation and enhancement of the quality of human life. The Brundtland Report., published in 1987, defined “sustainable development” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. It is possible to argue whether the Brundtland Committee’s view of what to sustain is exactly right. I will not go further into this issue here, but I will take that on in another talk on the environment this Monday (the 18th) to be given in New Delhi at the annual meeting of the International Association of Ecological Economics, under the title "Sustainability of What?" But I must also assert very strongly how indebted we all are to Gro Brundtland and the committee she led for understanding they have generated through the recognition that the value of the environment cannot be divorced from the lives of living creatures. This understanding has strongly influenced subsequent global interactions, including the World summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and other initiatives undertaken since the Brundtland Report was published.

Second, the environment is not only a matter of passive preservation, but also one of active pursuit. Even though many human activities that accompany the process of development may have destructive consequences, it is also within human power to enhance and improve the environment in which we live. In thinking about the steps that may be taken to halt environmental destruction, we have to search for constructive human intervention. Our power to intervene with effectiveness and reasoning can be substantially enhanced by the process of developed itself.

For example, greater female education and women's employment can help to reduce fertility rates, which in the long run can reduce the pressure on global warming and

the increasing destruction of natural habitats. Similarly, the spread of school education and improvements in its quality can make us more environment conscious. Better communication and a richer media can make us more aware of the need for environment-oriented, thinking. It is easy to find many other examples of interconnection. In general, seeing development in terms of increasing the effective freedom of human beings brings the constructive agency of people in environment-friendly activities directly within the domain of developmental achievements. Development is fundamentally an empowering process, and this power can be used to preserve and enrich the environment, and not just to decimate it.

We must not, therefore, think of the environment exclusively in terms of pre-existing natural conditions, since the environment can also include the results of human creation. For example, purification of water is a part of improving the environment in which we live. The elimination of epidemics, such as small pox (which has already occurred) and that of malaria (which ought to occur very soon if we can put our acts together), is a good illustration too. We have to move away from the limited -and limiting - idea that the environment is basically in conflict with development. Not only must the assessment of development be inclusive of environmental concerns, we must also take note of various ways in which the process of development may enrich the environment and its use. This recognition does not, in any way, change the significant fact that the process of economic and social development can, in many circumstances, also have strongly destructive consequences. Those unfavourable effects have to be clearly identified and firmly resisted, along with strengthening the positive and constructive contributions of development.

## 5

The central issue then, as I see it, is the need for an integrated formulation, which is concerned with lives rather than merely with objects of convenience. We have to link our commitments to the reasons for wanting to preserve those opportunities, those capabilities that we value. This can include even the presence of other species along with us, and the species preservation issue need not be divorced from the reasons why we, as thinking human beings, want such preservation – not seen exclusively in terms of our gross use and exploitation of other animals, but as a part of our reflected vision of a good world (here again, I fear, I would resist Al Gore's attempt to bring the Creator Guy in, and splitting us up into all kinds of belief systems on non-earthly subjects).

Our point of emphasis has to be on the enhancement of human freedoms in general, in the light of what we value and have reason to value. There is, I would argue, considerable room for a big advance in environmental understanding at this time. Integrating environment is an important step that has to be firmly taken at this time. The removal of poverty and the consolidation and enrichment of the environment could be seen as different parts of an integrated task. I very much hope that the conference that we are just completing would make a significant contribution in that direction.

I end, however, with an invitation. Even though this is meant to be something of a valedictory talk, I have never been very comfortable with trying to say the last word. So I will stop here and encourage you to comment, criticise, or ask questions – the

more combative the better – so that we really do have a challenging discussion on what I think is a very important subject. So I express my gratitude to you all for giving me the opportunity to speak, but now I want to have the opportunity to listen. You can help in this – many thanks!