

The Role of the Environment in Poverty Alleviation

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BOOK REVIEW

THE ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Edited by Paolo Galizzi

Reviewed by Melissa Blue Sky & Megan Chapman*

The nexus between poverty and environmental degradation—or framed more positively, between poverty alleviation and environmental protection—is too often ignored. For some, the two are seen as mutually exclusive and contradictory goals. For others, they are so closely tied as to be taken for granted. *The Role of the Environment in Poverty Alleviation* speaks to both audiences through illustrations of the myriad ways in which environment and development are linked.¹ Tackling such a broad area, the book's editor Paolo Galizzi does an admirable job of organizing the collection of essays thematically and alternating among a variety of viewpoints, from theoretical debates to case studies of natural disasters and cutting edge projects in social entrepreneurship.

This book is the result of a partnership between Fordham University, The Nature Conservancy, and the United Nations Development Programme (“UNDP”), which began a lecture series on People and the Environment in 2005. The collection of essays comes from the first in the lecture series, and draws from a multitude of fields: international environmental law and development policy, natural disaster relief and planning, microfinance and housing strategies, and legal empowerment of the poor. The project—both the lecture and book series—fits the times, as both poverty alleviation and the environment are explicitly listed in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (“MDGs”), which the United Nations Environment Programme (“UNEP”) and the UNDP have been working together to implement. Although some of the essays are limited in scope to efforts by particular organizations or projects, they provide interesting case studies of successful linking of environment and development.

Fittingly, the first section of the book, entitled *Poverty Reduction and the Environment are not Opposing Goals*, contains a sound critique of one prevailing view that incorporating environmental protection into development will slow growth and perpetuate poverty in developing countries. The late environmental economist, David Pearce, looks at the Environmental Kuznets Curve (“EKC”) hypothesis, which asserts that countries cannot protect their environment without sacrificing economic

growth. Pearce contends that in concluding environmental protection is a “luxury good,” EKC ignores negative impacts on human health caused by environmental degradation, which in turn decrease long-range growth. Moreover, EKC does not acknowledge that some damage to the environment may be irreparable or that alternative models incorporating environmental objectives into plans for development exist.

For Pearce, wealth includes human, social, and environmental capital, and using this measure, he suggests that while per capita incomes are increasing in some developing countries, per capita wealth in these countries is decreasing. This growth in income paired with loss of wealth may be an indicator of unsustainable development, due in part to resource exploitation and environmental contamination. Because the rural poor are disproportionately dependent on the ecosystem for their livelihoods, they are likely to be driven into even deeper poverty as a result of environmental degradation. To link environmental management with development gains, Pearce argues, environmental policy and investment in environmental assets such as water and sanitation, wetlands, and fisheries must incorporate the goals of long-term local management of the natural environment.


While the first section broadly addresses why poverty reduction and the environment are not opposing goals, the subsequent essays are organized around somewhat narrower themes: natural disasters, information and education, and legal empowerment. Of these, the first ties most closely to the book's overall thesis: that poverty alleviation and environmental goals are inter-related and must be tackled together. Most interesting is the brief study of the impact of the December 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia. After illustrating how the tsunami's effect was felt disproportionately by the poorest populations, author Annie Maxwell identifies the disaster's environmental causes and consequences. Where coral reefs, natural dunes, and mangroves were intact, they served as natural buffers and communities suffered less.

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For example, in Sri Lanka, an intact coral reef made the difference between the tsunami coming inland 1.5 kilometers versus fifty meters, and killing 1,700 people versus no one. On the other end of the spectrum, Maxwell argues, the recognition that environmental impact should be part of disaster relief planning came too late. For example, in the Aceh region of Indonesia, over 120,000 homes were destroyed and needed to be rebuilt. This tremendous demand for an immediate supply of lumber led to illegal logging of one of the area's few remaining rain forests. Similarly, poor coordination between relief groups led to a huge surplus of small fishing boats to replace those destroyed in Sri Lanka—without enough larger multi-daytrip fishing boats—leading rapidly to overfishing of shallow waters.

As with many interdisciplinary topics, the breadth of the issues and the overlapping cycles of cause and effect could overwhelm the reader if not for a few refreshingly pragmatic essays and inspiring case studies. One that stands out is an essay by three professionals involved in the World Conservation Union on knowledge necessary to meet poverty alleviation. It focuses on

the process of “knowledge to action,” or methods that can help to translate knowledge generated by academics and researchers into useful information for those who can put it into action in developing countries, and promote information exchange between practitioners.

Another essay offers a much-needed glimmer of hope: a case study of social entrepreneurship by International Development Enterprises India (“IDEI”). IDEI adapted the drip irrigation system used on large commercial farms to be suitable to the small farms common among subsistence farmers in India. The modified product prioritizes affordability such that a poor, risk-averse farmer may see net benefits of his investment within one growing season, and serves both poverty alleviation—increasing crop yields and thus profits—and environmental benefits—by reducing water consumption. While poverty and environmental degradation are often two components in a vicious cycle, the IDEI case study and others offered in this book remind us that creative approaches to development and environmental protection can and should yield positive outcomes on both fronts. 

Endnotes: Book Review

¹ THE ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION (Paolo Galizzi & Alena Herklotz eds., 2008).

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