



# Balancing Economic Development with Environmental Conservation: Challenges Facing the North and South

NAYOMI FIELD\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Coimbra, School of Law

\* Corresponding author: [gracacantomoniz@live.com.pt](mailto:gracacantomoniz@live.com.pt)

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## Abstract

This paper critically explores how development policies tend to ignore pressing environmental concerns. In the first section development in the North and South and the Bhopal disaster will be juxtaposed to show how development without environmental governance can be deadly. The article then turns to the way in which the Sri Lankan government's Moragahakanda Development Project strives for economic development without concern for the environment. It will be contended in this article that governments and big companies in the North and South have tended to carelessly use scarce resources for development.

## Introduction

This article explores how development policies tend to ignore pressing environmental concerns, natural and anthropogenic. Our environment is changing locally and globally and many believe we are approaching a global ecological tipping point. Informed environmental governance is needed to sensibly respond to these challenges that could become threats to access of land, food, and water. However, we often find that governments are deterred from taking corrective measures because they privilege economic gains at the expense of environmental concerns.

What scholars ironically call the "development" of the last two or three centuries has adversely affected the environment: soil, air, and water are becoming increasingly polluted, resulting in a lack of bio-diversity and scarcity of natural resources. Deforestation and desert formation are the secondary results of development. Although some scholars believed that technology and

science could manage the degradation of the environment, their idea has lost serious ground. Recent discussion indicates that all development activities should be organised according to environmental concerns as well.

Environmental problems are bound up with the economic and political contexts in which they emerge. Further, environmental problems influence and are influenced by political and economic activities. As one example from Sri Lanka will show, even projects that appear to be examples of environmental governance may be only fronts for political or economic gain.

## Development in the North and South

Nataraja Shanmugaratnam (2012) reveals how different factors contributed to the global environmental crises in the North compared to the South. For the North, the industrial revolution was an unprecedented social,eco-

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conomic, and cultural change. Generally speaking, in the colonial era the South provided the North with the resources to industrialise (Gupta 2012: 3). It reduced poverty and accelerated economic growth. According to Peter Hay (2009: 4), the impetus for environmentalism was born with the transformative impact of early industrialisation at the end of the eighteenth century. The total awareness of an environmental crisis in the North manifested in various forms: democratic freedom, student revolt, feminism, and eco-feminism. The crisis in the South was not driven by the industrial revolution, although it was certainly influenced by the systems of colonialism and capitalism that the colonial empires established in the South. Principle crises in the South were environmental degradation in the agricultural areas, natural forests, and mining centres linked to large-scale processes like mining of forest resources for export and shifting agriculture to steep slopes (Shanmugaratnam 2012: 178).

Andre Gunder Frank (1966) introduced 'dependency theory,' a way of thinking about the North and South that was rooted in a heartland-hinterland or core periphery spatial relationship (Mather and Chapman 1995: 59). Here the heartland represents European countries while hinterland Southern part of the world. The transition from peripheral to core status is hard to measure but some countries on the periphery can change their status. For example the United States has given an opportunity to countries in the South to export resource products to countries in the North. Core-periphery trade, however, often disadvantages the periphery, and growth in trade of manufactured goods has certainly been far greater than that of resources products (Mather and Chapman 1995: 59).

In line with Shanmugaratnam's emphasis on the difference between the North and South, political scientists often refer to the North as "developed countries" (DCs) and refer to the South as "less developed countries" (LDCs). Because LDCs tend to be poorer on a per-capita basis (Gupta 2012: 3) economic development might appear more attractive to LDC governments as ways to raise the standards of living in their country. Yet it is becoming clear that environmental governance is needed to genuinely raise the standards of living: because a large population of the rural poor directly depend on land for their food, economic policies in LDCs that tend to alienate the rural poor from land are extremely dangerous.

The distinction between LDC and DC might have outlived its usefulness, however. Some scholars, for example, argue that there are more differences between countries

in the South than between the nations of the North and South (Toye 1988). Further, the North and South share overlapping histories of modernisation. Modernisation refers to processes of change like growing urbanisation, and new forms of economic activity, increase in specialisation of labour (Kearney 1978: 3-4).

Karl Marx theorised that these modernisation processes are tied up with the formation of two classes of society, the capitalistic and the labour class. Capitalists, Marx believed, try to gain profits in a short period rather than protecting the environment or human welfare. Marx used the phrase 'metabolism (Stoffwechsel) between man and earth' to explain the ecological disruption under capitalism (Alier 2003: 3). This ecological disruption that began at the end of the eighteenth century became very disruptive for peasants dependant on the environment for their livelihood.

One reason for this disruption was the chemicals created during the industrial revolution that were very harmful for the environment. For example, American pest authorities created and circulated chemicals such as DDT (dichloro-diphenyltrichloroethane) to control pests. Rachel Carson (1965) reveals the harmful reaction of these chemicals that directly affect the environment in her masterpiece "Silent Spring." Suroopa Mukherjee (2010: 20) writes how the excessive use of chemical fertilisers has today resulted in a "pesticide treadmill" that increases the price of foods with profit only going to the manufacturer owners.

The Bhopal disaster is a stark reminder of the conflicts between economic development and environmental disaster. The Union Carbide India Limited (UCLI) prided itself as playing a key role in India's development (Mukherjee 2010: 20). In 1975, the Indian government gave permission to the company to manufacture pesticides. The Indian government wanted to produce pesticides as a development strategy to increase food production in order to combat hunger. Yet the company was careless about safety hazards and in 1984, 42 tons of toxic gas leaked into the atmosphere that resulted in nearly 4000 deaths, and 550,000 after-effect injuries like kidney failure, lung cancer, liver disease, and birth defects as a result of genetic mutation (Mukherjee 2010). This was a stark reminder to countries not only in the South, but all over the world, about the potential harm that pesticide production can cause, especially at factories where safety regulations are not enforced.

## Environment and the State

Because there is great pressure on states to bring eco-



conomic development to countries, many are impatient to see economic growth even if it is unsustainable. After the Second World War, for example, African, Asian, and Latin American countries showed very little interest regarding environmental conservation because they had to focus more on development. The Bhopal disaster is only one example of many instances where development that neglects environmental concerns can have dire consequences for the human population.

This section begins with an example from Sri Lanka. In October 2000, the Sri Lankan Ministry of Mahaweli development and the Lahmeyer International Association forwarded a capacity report to the 'Moragahakanda Development Project.'<sup>1</sup> Expected to be the second largest dam in Sri Lanka, the Moragahakanda dam should add 25 megawatts to the national grid, and provide an industrial water supply to the districts of Anuradhapura, Trincomalee, Polannaruwa, and Matale so that agriculture can develop in the North, East, and North-Western provinces. In the project report (2000: 24), section 3.13.4 uses the word 'Cost Recovery' which reveals the idea to sell the water. The section states: Recommendations for appropriate water charges will be given based on discussions with representatives of the concerned authorities and the on progress being made with the introduction of water charges at the time of reporting. (Chapabandara 2007: 26)

The main goal of the 'Moragahakanda Lake Project' is not for the paddy cultivation but for the subsidiary crops to have an economic value. On the one hand, it is under the term and condition of limiting the opportunities for paddy cultivation. Similarly, there is a possibility that the Moragahakanda dam would induce other industries instead of paddy cultivation. As Johnston states, when the state acts according to the whims and fancies of the capitalists, it is impossible to solve environmental problems (Johnston 1989, quoted in Sirisena 2010:194). The state, like in Sri Lanka, has responsibilities to manage bio-physical resources, but it is hard to see whether they accept or handle their duties well (Sirisena 2010:194). Although the government is responsible according to state policy to manage the environment many states have acted irresponsibly. For instance, in Brazil there are industries with out clear environmental laws so the air is polluted leading to health problems (Hardoy 1992, in Sirisena 2010: 198). Although the study is now outdated, Norton Ginsburg's 1957 study of the relationship between resources and economic growth is relevant to this example from Sri Lanka. Ginsburg concludes that to assist in economic development, resources need not lie within a country but they must be accessible. Accessibility implies both transport and export, which accumulate

the capital. One means of accumulating such capital is through exploiting resources within a country (Mather and Chapman 1995: 228).

If we examine the condition in China and Vietnam, it can be seen that socialist state policies have contributed much towards social and environmental catastrophe (Hershkovintz 1993, quoted in Sirisena 2010: 197). Some of the so-called third world countries broke away from the world system and reached some alternative lines in order to reconstruct and realign with the North on their own terms to form a more advantageous position. After the fall of the Berlin Wall parts of the Second World became First World, while others were incorporated into the South (Gupta 2012: 3). Today a few East Asian countries are referred to as newly industrialising countries (NICs) or 'the four tigers:' South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

## Conclusion

During the past half century, industrialisation of the third world has influenced the environment drastically. Further, third world industrialisation influences and is influenced by changes in international interactions. This phenomenon has been termed by Chase-Dunn, Kawano, and Brewer as "structural globalisation" (2000), whereby changes in density of international interactions are in relation to local networks. The economic policies followed by the state for exporting natural resources such as minerals and different kind of fish has affected local communities drastically who have become marginalised socially and economically. Governments who introduce temporary palliatives must strive for genuine environmental governance. By overusing natural resources we are creating environments of scarcity.

It is a vital requirement for each country to properly manage their natural resources. Projects like the Moragahakanda Development Project must incorporate environmental policies and creatively brainstorm new methodologies for environmental governance. The more governments care only about profit when implementing economic policies, the closer we approach an ecological tipping point, locally and globally. If governments in the North and South integrate environmental governance into their development projects, the North and South can achieve new vistas of sustainable development.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author hereby declares that there is no conflict of interests.

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1. Information about this project can be found here: <http://www.treasury.gov.lk/EPPRM/npd/pdfdocs/projecpipeline-chap/Irrigation.pdf>