

Share The World's Resources

sustainable economics to end global poverty

Global Warming.....Global Poverty – Joining The Dots

Global warming and global poverty have become the most urgent issues of our time, but the connections between both crises are often overlooked by campaigners and non-governmental organisations. A development model that prioritises economic growth, commercialisation and the ‘invisible hand’ of the market over and above environmental limits is widely acknowledged as a basic cause of global warming, but the same economic system has also failed to provide basic needs and essential resources for the majority world. Despite a growing public awareness of global warming and global poverty, the links between these central causes remain unaddressed by mass public campaigns, and far less heeded by government leaders or policymakers. Share The World's Resources (STWR) believe that it's time for the dots to be linked – and for a common platform to be established that can unite the global justice movement as a whole around a single cause.

The sustainability conundrum was outlined as far back as the early 1970s, foremost in a report called Limits to Growth and the work of E. F. Schumacher which both challenged the crux of orthodox thinking on economic development. The planet has limited resources and a finite carrying capacity, it was argued, while the demands placed upon it by a growth-dependent economy and the grossly materialistic lifestyles it engenders are insatiable. Continuous economic growth and global development therefore cannot be achieved without an immense overuse of resources, a fierce assault on nature, a high degree of pollution, and a threat to the planet's ability to sustain life.

The Extent of the Crisis

This message, although often muddled by multinational corporations, has become unavoidable over the past 30 years of economic globalization. Scores of eminent studies have concluded that unless a drastic reduction in carbon emissions is achieved, more than a million plants and animals could be extinct by 2050, accompanied by widespread hunger, catastrophic flooding, and higher deaths from heat-waves.

The heaviest burden will inevitably be felt in the poorest and most vulnerable nations, with some smaller countries potentially facing an agricultural productivity collapse in coming decades. A decrease in food security due to climate change is not only likely to vastly exacerbate malnutrition in developing countries, but forced migration could affect one billion people by 2050. As argued by UN General-Secretary Ban Ki-moon, climate change already threatens the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and the elimination of widespread poverty. If those countries that have done the least to contribute to global warming are going to pay the highest price, the most important issue clearly involves a moral responsibility on behalf of industrialised nations to redress the ‘carbon debt’ owed to developing countries.

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Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

The final reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released throughout 2007, have revealed how climate change could soon become one of the greatest threats to human life. Concluding that carbon dioxide and other atmospheric polluting gases must be reduced by 50 to 85 percent before 2050 to head off potential cataclysmic changes, the report calculated that a drastic reworking is required of industrial processes, transportation systems and agricultural practices. In the meantime, rich countries are rapidly increasing the pollution that causes global warming to record levels - despite the solemn pledges to reduce it. Total emissions of greenhouse gases by the world's 40 industrial nations have risen to an all-time high, demand for fossil fuels is ever-increasing, and the limits of natural resources are further threatened by emerging giant economies like China and India.

The result is an underlying conflict of interest in world priorities between endless growth through international competition and the unrestrained movement of goods and services, versus the need to cooperatively manage the global economy to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. The state of the environment shows how both approaches are incompatible; neoliberal policies of trade liberalisation and excessive commercialisation are in effect rules that force countries on a high emissions pathway, leading to environmental degradation in the blind pursuit of corporate profits and increased gross domestic product.

More Justice, Less Consumption

Although 'climate justice' is often used as an umbrella term to include the questions of individual responsibility for the environment and collective First World accountability, the issue is driven by the same interlinked questions of unsustainable consumption, ever-increasing commercialisation and social justice. If countries of the Global North are to achieve the necessary reduction in carbon emissions, a transformation is required in the way we manage the world economy, coupled with an extensive reduction in consumption levels by the richest countries and greater equity in resource usage between nations.

It is at this level of international policy that there is a clear parallel with the other key issue of our time - poverty and hunger. Ending poverty will initially require a greater sharing of the world's finite natural and productive resources, and this in turn will entail living more simply in rich countries so that others 'may simply live'. All this must be coordinated internationally, in line with widely accepted models of Contraction and Convergence or Cap and Share which present equitable solutions to the sustainability conundrum.

The prospect of saving the environment and ending poverty is not without great hope and optimism, however, if the emergent formation of a global mass movement can agree on the essential causes of both problems and acknowledge the links between the issues. By uniting on a common platform based upon the need for equity and greater economic sharing, we could soon be in a position to decisively influence the necessary change in direction.

For more information, news and analysis visit www.stwr.org/climate-change

