

Workshop: Poverty and the Environment

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Poverty can be considered one of the most toxic elements on earth. The links between poverty and the environment are extremely complex –incorporating economic, social, spiritual and relational elements. People in developing countries rely on increasingly fragile environmental systems and natural resources – and as a result, when these complex environmental systems are changed or negatively impacted, the effect on people's lives can be dramatic, often life threatening. The web of interactions that characterize poverty and environmental degradation is often termed the poverty and environmental degradation nexus. Dimensions of this nexus include interactions related to environmental health, livelihood functions and vulnerability.

The concept of a nexus often perpetuates a number of myths regarding the interactions between poverty and environmental degradation and inaccurately infers a causal link or inevitable spiral. Relationships between poverty and environmental degradation are complex, locally specific and mediated by institutions, power, policies and markets. Principally, these myths imply that poor people tend to degrade the environment more than the non-poor, that concern for the environment is a luxury of the rich and that poverty needs to be tackled before environmental degradation.

Conversely, many cases demonstrate the poor may care more for the environment than the non-poor and are willing to invest and conserve considerable resources in the hope of a future sustainability when they have a role in designing the investment and are assured of their rights to enjoy the fruits of their investment. Rather than implicate the poor as passive victims of the nexus, an understanding of how the poor attempt to develop sustainable livelihoods would provide a better platform from which to tackle poverty and environmental concerns in mutually reinforcing ways.

There is a common but differentiated responsibility for environmental issues in developing countries. Developing countries are primarily responsible for causing the crisis and have disproportionately reaped the benefits. The "ecological footprint" of northern countries far exceeds that of less developed countries. Developing countries are not without blame, however, and are therefore an essential component of bringing about a more healthy relationship between communities and their environments.

Poverty reduction and environmental protection cannot be separated. The two important goals are wrapped together in the concept of sustainability. Further, in working towards both poverty eradication and environmental protection, we must be aware of our Western deficiencies in understanding the very nature of the problem. Thus, we must learn from communities and organizations in the developing world. They have much to offer in understanding the natural world, things that have been lost to us over several generations, as our connection with the land becomes a distant memory. Unfortunately, the development model projected by the West around the world is teaching the poor to consume.

In 2 Corinthians 8: 13–15, it says *"I do not mean there should be relief of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'*" God has provided enough for all, but this "economy of manna" is not justly balanced, and the imbalance has led to disproportionate impacts on people's lives and their environments in developing countries. The care for the poor must be integrated within a values framework for caring for creation. Our goal must incorporate justice – as God intended it – in order to see his glory reflected in all people and their social, economic, relational and natural environments.

Reporter: Matt Van Geest