

Oxfam

and the
Environment



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*Cover photograph
Jeremy Hartley:*

**Planting tree seedlings
behind a diguette,
Burkina Faso**

For ten years, Oxfam and local people have been working together to develop a traditional method of water conservation. By building lines of stones, (diguette) along the contours, rainwater runoff is trapped so that water soaks into the ground, reducing erosion and greatly increasing crop yields. This simple technique has transformed many hectares of previously barren land throughout Burkina Faso.



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OXFAM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Oxfam works with groups of poor people in many parts of the world. For most of them, the quality of their lives – indeed their very survival – depends fundamentally upon the health of the natural environment. Yet, for many of these people – such as the farmers of Burkina Faso in the Sahel, or the rainforest peoples of Amazonia – the rapid deterioration of their environment undermines the daily struggle to maintain (let alone improve) their living standards.

In two decades of drought and deforestation, many villages of the Sahel – the arid land along the southern fringe of the Sahara desert – have lost as much as half of their cultivable land. The fine balance between the earth and its farmers, sustained for centuries, has broken down under the double pressure to grow more crops to earn more cash to service ever-increasing national debts and to feed a growing population. The people of Amazonia – the Yanomami and Kayapo Indians, for example – have survived for generations by managing the rainforest in a sustainable way. Now, millions of hectares of forest are burned and bulldozed each year to make way for mining operations, oil drilling, cattle ranches and landless families from outside the forest. In Amazonia and in the Sahel, environmental devastation is closely linked to poverty and injustice.

Scale of destruction

Environmental crises are no longer in the future: they are already here. The poorest people are hardest hit because they are directly dependent upon natural resources for their livelihoods and they have no other options when these resources are threatened. Worldwide, the pace of environmental change is accelerating:

Desertification in the Sahel

This area of the Sahel in West Africa was thick with trees only fifteen years ago.

Although drought and famine have been features of Sahelian life for centuries, the combination of drought and deforestation over the past two decades has resulted in the loss of as much as half of their cultivable land for many

Sahelian villages. In Burkina Faso, hot abrasive winds in the dry season carry away millions of tons of topsoil; when it does rain, lack of vegetation cover results in torrents carrying away more soil.

The delicate balance between people and the land has broken down. Women must walk miles to collect water or gather firewood for their daily meal.



JEREMY HARTLEY / OXFAM

- Every year, more than 6 million hectares of land (an area approaching the size of Ireland) are turning into desert – more than doubling the rate of the last three centuries.
- If present levels of destruction continue, it is predicted that almost a fifth of the earth's crop land will have disappeared by the end of this decade.
- Throughout the world, health is seriously threatened by water polluted with human and industrial wastes. In India, for example, 70% of surface supplies are polluted.

Deforestation in Amazonia

The state of Rondonia in Brazil is one of the areas of Amazonia which is being most rapidly deforested. Oxfam is working with rubber tappers and other people in Amazonia to try to encourage sustainable use of the Amazon forests.



TONY GROSS / OXFAM

- More than 20 million hectares of tropical forest (an area similar to that of England and Scotland) are cleared annually, mainly for subsistence farming, commercial agriculture and destructive logging.
- Up to 30% of all existing species (and tropical forests probably contain 90% of the total) may become extinct over the next 40 years; this rapid loss of biological diversity severely reduces the earth's potential to supply species of medicinal and economic value, and genetic material that could, for example, help countries adapt to climatic change (1).

The clearing and burning of forests in the South and – even more important – the increasing use of fossil fuels in the North, accelerate the production of greenhouse gases which cause global warming, the effects of which will also impinge soonest and most directly upon poor people. On present emission rates of the main greenhouse gases (especially carbon dioxide), global temperatures are widely predicted to increase 1°C by 2025 – a rate greater than at any time in the last 10,000 years (2).

The poorest people live in the more ecologically fragile and unstable areas of the world and, having no alternative livelihoods, are most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climatic change. Warmer oceans

would cause sea levels to rise, and this alone would devastate much of Bangladesh and northern Egypt, making at least 50 million people homeless (3). Many more will suffer unless they can be helped to prepare and adapt quickly enough. Locally and globally, as the environment suffers, the prospects for sustaining lives and livelihoods recede. It is essential to take long-term preventive action *now*, in the North as well as the South, to enable future generations to have any chance of surviving with a reasonable quality of life.

The meaning of sustainable development

Sustainable development is about people, environment and the future. Among many recent definitions, the one given by the Brundtland Commission is the simplest:

'sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (4).

Implicit in this definition is the idea of development which brings social and economic advances but also safeguards the environment and its resources so that options are not closed for the future. But conventional development has many forms, driven by different objectives. The objective in many parts of the world – rich and poor – is rapid short-run economic gain for a few, often at the expense of social justice and long-term environmental security.

Meeting basic needs

In the context of Oxfam's work, a crucial element is missing from the Brundtland analysis – poverty. It is unrealistic to expect poor people to conserve resources for the future when they are struggling to meet the needs of the present.

So, from an Oxfam perspective, the priority in sustainable development must be to enable the poorest people to meet their basic needs while protecting, enhancing and making accessible the environmental resources required.

Meeting basic needs means action at the very local level – to increase food, improve shelter, sanitation and water supplies, provide better health care and education, increase real incomes and secure livelihoods. And all this has to be done while protecting essential human dignity and addressing the particular needs of the most vulnerable groups, such as women and children, indigenous people and pastoralists. Securing livelihoods is a key issue, for so many other development benefits depend on this.

**Turkana women
building water-
harvesting bunds in
Kenya**

Oxfam became involved in water-harvesting projects in the traditionally pastoralist area of Turkana after many people lost their livestock in the 1980-1981 famine. The rainwater fed gardens, some owned by women, produce crops of sorghum which have contributed to increased food security in the area.



JEREMY HARTLEY / OXFAM

Women's needs and opportunities are especially important. Some of the poorest and most disadvantaged people in many societies are women, and they often play the major role in environmental management. Enabling them to contribute to, and benefit from, more effective natural resource management is a vital task for the future (5).

In Oxfam terms, sustainable development is about grassroots improvements which are often ignored in striving for national development: sustainable development must apply at the very local level.

For most of their basic needs, poor people, especially in rural areas, rely directly upon the wealth of the natural environment and upon renewable resources. Soils, trees and water are all vital for their survival and often for their livelihoods. Trees, for example, provide not only food crops, but also timber for building, fuel for cooking, fodder for animals and fibres for weaving. Well-managed, accessible forests are sometimes as important as productive cropland and pastures for rural living standards, especially for women.

Women carrying fuelwood in Burkina Faso

Fuelwood is estimated to supply 80% of energy needs in sub-Saharan Africa. It is already in very short supply and will become more so. According to the Brundtland Report, if harvesting continues at the present rate, by the year 2000 some 2.4 billion people will be living in areas where wood is very scarce or has to be obtained elsewhere. This means longer and longer journeys, usually for women and children, to collect the daily requirements of fuelwood.



MARK EDWARDS / OXFAM

Many Third World people (though not all) have the knowledge to manage renewable resources in sustainable ways. They apply traditional methods of soil and water conservation, they know which varieties of food crops are resistant to drought and to pests, which trees provide wood to burn efficiently with little smoke, and which plants have medicinal properties. Before this indigenous knowledge is lost,

local people need to share and build upon their experience and be supported in their conserving actions. Secure land tenure is more likely to lead to long-term care for the environment. In some areas, people need access to appropriate technologies and training, to credit for materials and equipment. But most important of all – they must have recognised rights to participate in decisions on the management and development of resources, not only for reasons of social justice but also to ensure sustainable use.

In Oxfam terms, sustainable development is about the *process* of change as well as the product – it describes not just some future goal but a way of developing which *empowers* people so that their needs and their rights are recognised, their voices heard and their experience shared. Popular participation – a key element of the Brundtland Commission recommendations – is a fundamental requirement for sustainable development.

But this type of development does not happen in most areas of the world. Instead, millions of people are either bypassed by existing models of development or damaged by them. The land and water which support them are expropriated, eroded or polluted by more powerful groups. They are often forced out of their homes or away from the source of their livelihoods to make way for large-scale development projects like dams, or for commercial farms. They are denied access to (or must pay for) traditionally 'free goods' from the environment such as fuelwood, fodder or water.

Where poverty and injustice push people to intensify the grazing or cultivation of marginal land, and prevent them from applying traditional conservation skills, they are forced to degrade resources. Poor farmers, for example, have to cultivate highly unstable slopes, causing soil erosion; fuel gatherers must take green wood when the dead wood has

gone, or use crop wastes for fuel instead of fertiliser; charcoal making, which further damages fuelwood supplies, may be the only source of income for a landless family.

Poverty thus becomes a cause as well as a consequence of environmental problems.

In urban, as well as rural, areas the poorest people suffer the worst living conditions. They live in makeshift settlements at the city margins on land unfit for housing, or in crowded city slums. Homes are constructed on unstable hillsides, on land subject to flooding or in contaminated areas close to industry. There are few or no basic services (water supply, sewerage, garbage removal or electricity) except those organised by the slum-dwellers themselves. Roads and transport facilities are poor, medical care is inadequate and there are few schools. Air and water pollution levels in and around urban homes are high, and there may be no opportunities for growing food, collecting fuel, or safely disposing of wastes.

Obstacles to sustainable development

There are many underlying reasons for these problems of the local and global environment – and all of them are linked. Crippling **debt burdens** are forcing an increasing number of Third World countries to exploit their natural resource base in ways that are not sustainable. In the Sahel, for example, intensive cash cropping to earn foreign exchange is damaging soil and water resources over the long term. It is also taking place at the expense of food production for local people. Logging for timber exports in parts of Indonesia and Malaysia means that forests are plundered and people lose land and livelihoods. These activities – often pursued in the name of ‘development’ – cannot be sustained.

Structural adjustment programmes are designed to re-orient national economies to respond to indebtedness. They promote the production of crops, timber and minerals for export, at the expense of food security for local people. Because the International Monetary Fund is concerned that debtor countries must earn more and spend less, structural adjustment also brings cuts in basic services like health care, education and training – further punishing the poorest. An Oxfam study in Zambia showed that women are often the hardest hit by structural adjustment measures.

Disadvantageous **terms of international trade**, especially low and volatile commodity prices and protected markets in the North, force developing countries to rely upon primary products and to grow more, at considerable environmental cost – and still their earnings fall. The deterioration in terms of trade in the first few years of the 1980s, according to the World Bank, has cost developing countries some \$100 billion each year. In the early 1980s, while less and less food was produced for local people, Sahelian countries increased their output of cotton by 20%. Yet, over the same period, the price of cotton fell by 30%. These countries were on the treadmill of producing more to earn less.

Dwindling **aid flows** from North to South, and **inappropriate aid projects** and programmes, continue to bypass or damage the poorest people. Though there is much talk of 'aid' from the rich world to the poor, there is actually a net flow of wealth from the South to the North. Because of soaring interest rates, the 'debt crisis countries' of the developing world transferred \$40 billion to the rich world in 1989. And there is growing uncertainty over the consequences, for the Third World, of increased aid from rich countries to Eastern Europe. The **quality** as well as the **quantity** of aid is inadequate. Development assistance is often tied to the export of particular goods and services from donor countries

which can be inappropriate for the recipient (for example, complex machinery which cannot easily be repaired). Meanwhile, aid for environmental projects and the transfer of resource-saving technologies has a low priority and is failing to keep pace with need. There is concern that even 'environmental' projects can be damaging: eucalyptus planting as part of India's aid-funded social forestry programme in Karnataka was opposed by Indian groups because the eucalyptus plantations failed to meet local needs for fuelwood, fodder and food.

Continuing **conflict** between and within states brings devastating environmental consequences – as in Cambodia and Mozambique – and prevents any long-term investment in conserving natural resources. Disputes over natural resources may lead to conflict, and again the consequence is often environmental degradation. Where conflict is reduced, arms and other military spending can be diverted to meeting basic needs and managing the environment for sustainable development.

Alongside all these problems is the **extravagant consumption** of the rich world. This underlies much unsustainable resource exploitation in the poor world, generates the transfer of wastes, pollution and inappropriate technologies from North to South, and accelerates global warming through high levels of energy consumption.

Within the developing world, great inequalities of wealth prevent improvements for the poor. The lack of access to land is a major source of poverty; in Brazil, for example, where more than 60% of the land is in the hands of 4% of its people, the landless poor are forced to exploit the rainforest and other fragile environments. These problems will not be solved in predominantly rural Third World countries without finding ways of enabling poor people to own or control the land they depend on for their basic needs. Land reform may be difficult but it affords the only realistic opportunity for overcoming the poverty

which drives people to encroach on fragile environments such as tropical forests, desert margins and mangrove swamps.

From an Oxfam perspective, great wealth, like extreme poverty, can destroy the environment. The rich (wherever they live) can no longer expect to maintain their lifestyles on the backs of the poor. In resource terms, the North has rapidly to become expert at doing more with less. Sustainable development is about *interdependence* and a *fairer world*, about sharing resources within and between countries and transferring wealth from richer to poorer. Oxfam recognises that great obstacles lie in the way of creating a fairer world – in the lack of democracy at all levels, in corruption and the unequal power structures in those countries which have rich and ruthless elites.

The movement towards sustainable development can be further undermined by ***rapid population growth***, for this adds to all the natural resource problems poor families and poor countries face. Women suffer especially, and their ill health, repeated and unwanted pregnancies and the burdens of caring for small children also limit their capacity to participate in the resource management and decision-making which underpins sustainable development. All the evidence is that good development, which reduces poverty and improves child survival and women's education, will bring smaller families – but this takes time. Meanwhile, a way forward must be to enable all those couples (some 300 million) who do not want more children, to have access to the means to limit their families (6). An integrated approach is required, which is sensitive to women's needs and enables them to take control of their lives. In an Oxfam-supported project in Nepal, it was shown that family planning (to space children and to limit family size) works best when it is part of a wider pro-

gramme which links health care with environmental management and better incomes. But the responsibilities of the international community go far beyond supporting family planning programmes towards correcting the inequalities, within and between countries, in the access to resources. Large families are often the only means by which poor people can respond to these inequalities, to provide labour for the land or security in their old age.

From an Oxfam perspective, all these obstacles to sustainable development – indebtedness, unfair terms of trade, inadequate and inappropriate aid, continuing conflict, wasteful consumption in the North, inequitable access to resources and rapid population growth – demand action not only at the local level, but nationally and internationally. While one priority is to work for the relief of poverty and sustained provision for basic needs at the grassroots, Oxfam will continue to use its experience to influence governments, international agencies and business to act in ways which support and do not undermine sustainable development.

What is Oxfam doing?

Oxfam has been working overseas with poor people for nearly 50 years, enabling them to protect their environments and the resources which meet their needs. In Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, support is given to groups conserving soil and water, planting trees and fighting the spread of deserts. Across north Africa, for example, through its network of project partners, Oxfam's Arid Lands Unit keeps groups in touch, sharing solutions to common problems. And the most effective solutions can be the simplest. In an Oxfam experiment, ten years ago,

Watering fruit tree seedlings in Indonesia

Oxfam project partner organisation *le Rai* works on agricultural development, water conservation, terracing and tree-planting in an effort to 're-green' Sabu Island.

Oxfam supports many tree-planting projects worldwide which meet local needs for fuelwood, fodder, food and shelter as well as making some contribution to absorbing carbon dioxide, a major greenhouse gas. Women play a vital role in environmental management of this kind, using their traditional knowledge and skills.



farmers in the Yatenga province of Burkina Faso began to conserve water by building lines of stones along the contours of the land. Stone lines now trap rainwater in half the provinces of Burkina, reducing soil erosion and doubling crop yields. Dry wells give water again and more than 5,000 hectares of dead land have been reclaimed.



Moving house to a dry site, in Bangladesh

In 1988, Bangladesh faced the worst floods in living memory: two-thirds of the country was submerged in flood water, and 3.8 million houses were completely destroyed. Thousands of poor people lost their chickens, goats and cattle. Bangladesh is used to flooding; it brings irrigation water and increases soil fertility but excessive flooding brings a trail of devastation. In the future, massive flood preparation efforts will be necessary. The effects of global warming and resulting rise in sea levels could cause immeasurable devastation in Bangladesh with many millions being made homeless.

Much of Oxfam's relief work is a response to environmental disasters – both natural and man-made – and the environmental refugees they bring. However, after the famines in Sudan or floods in Bangladesh, Oxfam also helps local people to prepare more effectively for future disasters – by building grain stores, moving to safer land, and repairing river and sea defences. Oxfam-supported projects for diversifying employment enable people to become less dependent upon vulnerable livelihoods. In some countries, Oxfam works with its partners to prevent disasters: one group in Peru helps people to build walls in gullies and dredge river channels to avoid extensive soil erosion during heavy rains.

Rubber tappers from Amazonia, fighting to protect their rainforest environment, are one of a number of groups supported by Oxfam. Together with other forest dwellers, they are organising to secure their rights to land and establish 'extractive reserves'.

These are stretches of forest set aside by the state, on a long lease, for use in the traditional way – tapping rubber, collecting Brazil nuts and a variety of other forest crops. In other areas, Oxfam is working to empower local groups to campaign successfully against water and air pollution and pesticide abuse. Recognising the limits of what can be done by small projects, Oxfam continues to challenge the activities of major development agencies – like the World Bank – to be more sensitive to the needs of local people, when their lives are affected by large dams, commercial cropping schemes and other disruptive developments. Oxfam is working with aid agencies, NGOs, companies and others to change international and national policies on, for example, unjust trading practices, debt and aid, which all have repercussions for the environment.

At home, over 800 Oxfam shops, and the Huddersfield Wastesaver centre started in 1975, form a comprehensive recycling system for second-hand clothing and household goods. Goods are carefully sorted into those which can be resold and those which cannot. Wastesaver converts unsellable textiles into usable materials. It also processes some 60 tonnes of aluminium per year – much more energy efficient than producing new metal from bauxite. The shops also promote fair trade with producers in the Third World by providing outlets for their products.

Oxfam Trading buys products made of natural materials from properly managed sources, and many products on sale in the shops are made from recycled materials. Through the 'Bridge' scheme, Oxfam supports many small producer groups in three continents, fostering more self-reliance and better working conditions and encouraging environmentally sound practices. It is this direct link with the lives of individuals in both rich and poor countries that gives Oxfam a unique perspective on environmental issues – and a powerful tool for action.

Summing up Oxfam's priorities

Safeguarding the environment means many things – not only supporting campaigns (in the developed and developing world) to protect resources from further damage, but remedial work to clear existing degradation and pollution, and positive action to create more resilient environments which can sustain lives and livelihoods for the poorest. Creating a better environment is an essential feature of the equitable, participative and sustainable model of development Oxfam wants to promote. Oxfam's priorities for action to bring sustainable improvements in lives and livelihoods are:

- **Primary environmental care:** enabling the poorest people – by action at grassroots level – to protect, restore and enhance renewable resources.
- **Popular participation:** empowering people and communities to gain access to the resources they need and to be fully involved in decisions about the use and management of the environment.
- **Interdependence:** working for a fairer world and encouraging countries and people to share the technologies, experience and resources for sustainable development.
- **Removing the obstacles:** working at national and international levels to overcome the underlying, structural obstacles to sustainable development, especially debt, unfair trade, inadequate aid and continuing conflict.
- **Acting now:** alerting people, governments and companies in developed countries to the accelerating environmental crises facing poor people, and the urgent need for action.

Sources

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The World Commission on Environment and Development was
established in 1983 by the UN General Assembly to propose long-term
environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by 2000
and beyond. The Commission was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland,
then Prime Minister of Norway.

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7 Wastesaver, in Huddersfield, UK, was opened in 1975. Its staff sort and
sell clothing and other textiles and aluminium collected in Oxfam shops
throughout the UK.