

Introduction

This book is based on the experience of a range of national and international non-government organisations (NGOs) that have spent several years exploring the interdependency between environmental change and poverty alleviation. It draws on a number of case-histories from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and also on theoretical work by academics with strong links to development practice. It is a book for development professionals – for those engaged in helping to improve the plight of poor, deprived, excluded, or oppressed people. It aims to enhance their learning in the field of environment and development, or sustainable development in practice.

This first chapter explains briefly what the book is about. It defines environment and livelihoods, and highlights some of the main reasons why it was written.

People and environments

Environments are contested. Different people see them differently, have different interests in them, and have different relationships with them. In September 1992 a meeting in Managua of representatives of NGOs and grassroots groups from Central America discussed the meaning of environment, and produced the following:

Environment is both Nature and Society, which relate to each other and coexist. In the environment we find forests, human beings, land, mountains, water, air, animals, etc., which are mutually inter-relating. This relationship can be good or bad. It is good when human beings can make adequate use of other environmental components, like water, forest, and air. It is bad when humankind has destroyed them (for example with deforestation), or when a few people appropriate resources and thus endanger our survival and reproduction. That is why we need conservation, equity between human beings, and harmony between human beings and Nature.¹

People depend on environmental resources – and deprived, excluded, or poor communities, both rural and urban, particularly so. The statement quoted above does not stress the exploitation of resources or (economic) growth: it emphasises equality instead. It talks of harmony between people and nature, and, significantly, of a whole entity and of connections between the parts that make up that whole: the definition incorporates connections between social development and natural-resource conservation.

It is striking that the participants at the meeting separated 'nature' from 'society': in other words, they saw people as different from their natural environments. That is not a universal view, for some belief systems hold that people are as 'natural' as plants or rocks. In fact, in some religious traditions the concept of 'nature' is similar to the notion of God in others. However, the participants stressed the interrelationship between nature and society and expressed a high level of concern for environmental resources, which suggests that they regarded environments as more than merely useful resources that might be controlled and exploited. They suggested that humanity has responsibilities for the relationship between society and nature, and (implicitly) responsibilities for the future of the natural environment and for future generations of people.

This definition of 'environment' includes people and their relationships and the natural world within one whole entity, called environment. For some, this concept is unhelpful or unnecessarily complicated. Dictionaries usually define environment as 'surroundings of human beings', and thus exclude people from environment. Indeed, many people who use the word 'environment' exclude themselves and others from that notion, consciously or subconsciously. The use of the word in development circles has, however, broadened its meaning, and it has now come very close to the definition agreed by the participants in the meeting in Managua.

This book argues that it is useful to think of environment broadly, and to include people and social relationships. 'Environment' thus becomes a vehicle for analysing and describing relationships between people and their surroundings, now and in the future. Nevertheless, the word is used in several places in its narrower meaning of 'surroundings', in particular when I speak of environments in the plural – and the context will make that clear. Nature can be seen as both broader and narrower than mere natural resources: it encompasses life (including human life) and thus could involve relationships between human beings too. In this text, 'nature' will be used to denote something separate from society and social relations, unless otherwise stated. Nature is something both rural and urban, contrary to popular perception: few people who 'seek communion with nature' expect to find it on the street corner of an inner city. However, air, water, and (for example) earthquakes are obviously important to the survival of human settlements, and none of those is created by people.

Poor, excluded, or deprived people often depend on their environments for survival, and sometimes they fall victim to environmental disasters. Some argue that poverty is an important cause of the global environmental crisis, and others argue that it is exactly the other way around: that environmental degradation, combined with a lack of environmental rights, is the main cause of poverty. True or untrue, much has been written on the relationships between poverty and environmental change, by development professionals, activists, and academics.²

The livelihood opportunities of poor, excluded, or deprived people are closely linked to questions of environmental sustainability, and looking at one without looking at the other does not make any sense. Different people have different interests, powers, and capabilities to improve their chances of survival and their livelihoods. Indeed, the concept of 'sustainable livelihoods' is central to this book, and is defined and explained in detail in chapter 3. 'Livelihoods' are also interpreted broadly, but are still primarily an expression of the material relationship between environments, people, and their social institutions.

A book about environments and livelihoods

Several lessons from NGO practice prompted the production of this book.

An unresolved question: why environment?

In the mandates of most development NGOs and national, bilateral, and multilateral development agencies, the eradication of poverty is central. Many also declare their support for 'sustainable development', and express their sympathy for environmental conservation of some sort. The debate about two-way links between poverty creation and environmental degradation has raged for some years now; it remains unresolved, even though academic work is progressing on theoretical frameworks, such as political ecology, that might help to settle it. The conviction that environmental change is important, no matter what the complexities or the precise nature of the relationship, has prompted agencies to develop appropriate policies. In particular from the late 1980s onwards, international donor agencies and thousands of their partners in low-income countries have searched for the positive links between poverty alleviation and environmental improvements or regeneration. They have developed policies and aims variously referred to as 'sustainable development', 'primary environmental care' (PEC),³ 'sustainable livelihoods', and also 'sustainable land-use'.

These policies help to focus development programmes, and they support learning about the compatibility of the goals of poverty alleviation, (inter-generational) equality, and environmental care. However, internal assessments reveal that NGO staff have limited conceptual understanding of the complex links between poverty and environmental rights, degradation, and sustainability. These relationships require knowledge of climate change and trade relations, of socially differentiated resource use and resource degradation, of land-tenure relationships and demographic change, and much more. The question *Why is environment important in poverty alleviation?* remains, if only because these matters are complex.⁴ Furthermore, evidence suggests that it is becoming more important than ever to understand and manage environmental change-processes in attempts to overcome poverty, for example because of the impacts on poor and vulnerable people of climatic changes that are enhanced by the 'greenhouse effect', and also because of the dependency of poor people on ever-degrading biodiversity.

Strategic directions

The strategic plans of development agencies nowadays demonstrate a reasonable degree of coherence in relating environmental change-processes to the agencies' core mandate of poverty alleviation.⁵ Nevertheless, in-depth interviews with senior managers reveal the following strategic issues to which more detailed attention must be paid.⁶

- Environmental factors are centrally important in drylands and other fragile rural livelihood contexts, in particular in relation to food production. In urban areas and displaced people's camps, sanitation, water supply, and housing are of central importance. Environmental factors imply risks and often play a critical part in disaster creation, leading, for example, to flooding and drought.
- Macro-policies such as multilateral trade agreements often have an impact on livelihoods, and indeed on the environmental resources on which livelihoods depend. This happens mainly through globally connected markets that are influenced by those policies. For example, extractive industries are expanding rapidly, with economic liberalisation and the increase of foreign investment in developing countries. Their investments and profits are driven by the demand of rich consumers, but local people living near mines suffer the consequences of destruction and pollution. Similarly, trade and investment policies affect food prices and agriculture, transport, and the energy sector, all with obvious environmental aspects and impacts on the livelihoods of poor people.

- Control over natural resources, in particular water and land, is a central issue in (local) conflicts, survival, and livelihood sustainability, particularly for the poorest women and ethnic minorities. Policy work and campaigning on food security and land tenure is often national, as is environmentalists' lobbying on pollution, consumption, dam building, mining, shrimp farming, and deforestation. This public-policy work should take account of political risks that might be entailed for local communities, who must be involved in the process.
- National and international development NGOs are not usually well linked into environmental movements, at a national or international level. However, environmental debates offer opportunities to lobby on poverty-related issues.
- More and better impact assessment is important for learning, for communicating success, and for advocacy. Assessing impacts on livelihoods and health must include assessing impacts on various environmental factors.
- We need more institutional learning on sustainability, i.e. environmental, social, economic, and institutional/organisational sustainability.
- Development agencies must consider vulnerability, coping mechanisms, and survival, as much as the sustainability of livelihoods.

It is not controversial to interpret these survey results as strong evidence of the need for support with strategy development, research, and institutional learning on the subject of poor people's livelihoods and environments.

Limited knowledge of impacts on environments and livelihoods

NGOs do not systematically consider the environmental impact of their activities beyond a very general level. In Oxfam GB, for example, which has made on average about two thousand grants per year over the past decade, the administration system requires a statement of the expected environmental impact to be made on every individual grant-application form – but without specifying what that means. Snap surveys between 1994 and 1999 suggest limited understanding of what is meant by 'environmental impact', and reveal that the relevant section of the form is often not completed, even in cases where environmental impacts can clearly be expected. This is despite the provision of training and some written guidance for 'front-line' staff and partner organisations.⁷

The actual environmental impact of small-scale and community-based projects, some years after their initiation, is rarely assessed. The impact of individual community-based projects is often assumed to be insignificant and

to be generally positive. This is, however, not always the case, and, whether impacts are negative or positive, their cumulative effects can be significant. Information on impact is thus not often available, and is complicated by a lack of clarity about what environmental impacts can be, and how they relate to local people's livelihoods and poverty.

There is also evidence that a very high proportion of grants and projects of development NGOs relate to natural resources, for example to water supply and sanitation, agriculture, and housing, and in urban programmes also to garbage collection.⁸ An increasing number of such projects make explicit reference to environmental regeneration, for example through sustainable agriculture practices. Anecdotal evidence from evaluation of single projects or project partners, or groups of projects and partner organisations, is encouraging in the sense that many projects do consider environmental aspects in relation to livelihoods, health, social relations, and resource rights, as much as they consider physical environmental features. Many examples will be given in this book. Nevertheless, the difficulties in comparing the plans (given their diversity and lack of data, as pointed out above), let alone the data that are produced in reviews, evaluations, and impact assessments, make it extremely difficult to aggregate environmental change, changes in rights to environmental resources, and improvements in livelihood sustainability at a level higher than that of the project.

Guidelines and NGO staff capacities

Guidelines do exist for incorporating environmental concerns into small-scale and participatory development projects, and there are many guidelines available for larger projects. For emergency-relief operations, the UNHCR has published environmental guidelines, and most development agencies, including national and international NGOs, provide staff with internal guidance for ensuring at least some consideration of environmental sustainability. Most of these materials are project-oriented, focus on *how to* improve practice, and ignore the question that is of strategic importance: *why environment?* They also fail to consider some practical tools that might be used, while emerging evidence suggests that, in fact, existing checklists and other guidelines are not often used. Furthermore, strategic shifts of many national and international NGOs towards policy-influencing work and disasters-related work demand different and better analytical tools and, especially, strengthened information systems and institutional learning processes. The latter requires participatory research and indicator development, and not just the application of sterile checklists.

Training of NGO staff in practical approaches and tools to improve understanding of the impacts of development on poor people's environments

and livelihoods intensified in national and international NGOs from 1992, the year of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED, also known as 'the Earth Summit'). Although limited evidence is available, it seems that the longer-term impacts of training on staff capacities, projects, environments, and livelihoods are mixed. In Oxfam GB and partner NGOs, the sustainable livelihoods framework has been promoted as an instrument to explain links between poverty and environmental change, together with tools to encourage the participation of deprived and excluded people. The adoption of the sustainable livelihoods framework was limited among all but the more senior staff, and checklists from environmental impact assessment (EIA) are still rarely used. More successful has been the adoption of participatory approaches to project management by staff and partner staff.⁹

The poor uptake of guidelines from training sessions by development professionals suggests the need for changes in direction and also for renewed efforts to apply the guidelines. NGOs and official development agencies too have reached a point where they have learned significantly about participation, local environmental change, and livelihood sustainability. Nevertheless, assumptions are often made that can no longer be sustained, and there are few handy tools by which theory and academic analysis can be linked clearly to development practice. The development of approaches and frameworks regarding sustainable livelihoods,¹⁰ participatory monitoring and evaluation and impact assessment,¹¹ and lessons from attempts to improve the environmental impacts of NGOs in the 1990s are all important recent developments in this respect. This book builds on them, and aims to make a further contribution.

Overview of the book

This book is not a manual, but it does offer some practical advice, as well as introducing key theories and suggesting the strategically important questions that development professionals should ask – and it shows where answers may be found. Its relevance is to rural and urban communities in the developing world, but not exclusively. It can be used to help effective campaigning and lobbying, better formulation and implementation of development strategies, and participatory project planning, monitoring, and impact assessment. What makes the book different from most others is that it is firmly rooted in the experience of development NGOs, and responds to their needs for further learning.

The book first reflects on the relationships between poverty and environmental change, partly from a theoretical and historical perspective but also on the basis of lessons from development practice. Then it provides

frameworks for action in development programmes, exploring power relationships and ideas of stakeholder participation, and in particular the notion of sustainable livelihoods. Thirdly, the book discusses practical tools and approaches in project management. Finally it looks at how strategies and policies can address the structural causes of environmental degradation and poverty. Each of these main themes is addressed in a separate chapter, as follows.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the historical roots of thinking about 'the environment' and discusses contemporary forms of environmentalism. It continues with a summary of theories of environment and development, especially sustainable development. Much of this is centred on various means of valuing aspects of nature and the environment, and, indeed, on the question *what needs to be sustained?* – nature? natural resources? the physical environment constructed by people? social relationships and people's institutions? human capital? The book also considers situations where sustainability is far from reality as a result of wars and various environmental hazards: contexts where the concept of vulnerability is of central importance.

Chapter 3 begins with examples of participation in development processes and the resulting effects on livelihoods and environments in a city in Brazil and remote rural communities in Mozambique and Vietnam. There follows a detailed explanation of the concept of sustainable livelihoods and how it can be used by development agencies as an analytical tool for project assessment and policy formulation. The chapter concludes with a section on social interaction, power, and participation in development processes. It offers a range of ways to involve a variety of social actors in various processes, from project planning and project evaluation to strategic planning and campaigning. In fact, participation is seen here more as negotiation among various stakeholders, of which national and international development agencies and community-based organisations are just some.

Chapter 4 addresses project management and the integration of questions of environmental sustainability in the project cycle. It presents the idea of – and lessons from the use of – environmental impact assessment (EIA) in large projects funded by governments and private companies, and the importance of information generated by such processes for affected citizens and campaigning NGOs. The second section focuses on the application of similar formal processes in small-scale community development projects, which has met with some success. In this chapter the lessons and suggestions relating to project management are also applied to the more extreme conditions of disaster situations, where management is under enormous pressures from rising death rates, human displacement, and inadequate resources. In the third section a hybrid process is presented that integrates the concept of

sustainable livelihoods, lessons from formal EIA, and participatory methodologies, including participatory rural appraisal (PRA). This chapter does not fully address the *how?* question in terms of prescribing guidelines for responding to disasters, ensuring the participation of various social actors, or assessing environmental impact, but it provides many leads.

Chapter 5 discusses some national and international environmental policies and strategies of governments and development agencies. It treats the idea of longer-term planning, i.e. strategic planning of development agencies, ranging from small, local activist NGOs to large international development agencies. The main question addressed is *how* ideas of sustainability, the realities of poor people's environments, and their livelihood needs can and should be integrated in policy processes. It refers to methodologies of strategic environmental assessment and also presents some general indicators for sustainable development. In this chapter important environmental issues of a global nature are explained in some detail, including climate change, biodiversity, and agriculture, and also industrialisation and urbanisation. It gives examples of campaigns in support of poor people's environmental rights, and campaigns for changes in national and international policies that condition local environments and livelihood opportunities.

Throughout the text, practical suggestions are provided. There is a long list of bibliographical resources, an appendix with details of some important websites, and another one that provides an overview of environmental treaties and historical events.

You are encouraged to pick and choose from these chapters and appendices, according to your particular interests. Indeed, I hope that the book will satisfy a range of needs, and above all that it will stimulate further exploration of the inter-relationships between environmental change and improvements in the lives and livelihoods of deprived people.