

NO TIME TO WASTE



**Poverty
and the
Global
Environment**

**Joan Davidson and Dorothy Myers
with Manab Chakraborty**

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – 20 years on from the last United Nations Conference on the Human Environment – takes place in a very different world. Circumstances have changed dramatically – not least in the world's political shape. Environmental awareness is everywhere greater: in this respect there has been a transformation of attitudes.

But amid so much hope, action lags far behind the rhetoric. Conditions for the poorest people, in many countries, have not improved and the gap between rich and poor has widened – both within and between nations. People's lives and their land are still devastated by deepening poverty, environmental degradation and armed conflict.

The world faces two contrasting crises: one fifth of its people live in poverty and destitution while a quarter enjoy lifestyles of profligate consumption, using 80 per cent of the earth's resources.¹ A deteriorating environment links them both.

Environmental crises are no longer in the future: they are already here – and most of them hit hardest at the poorest people living in the Third World.* They are fundamentally dependent on the health and wealth of the natural resource base; they cannot draw upon a sophisticated, industrial way of life to buffer the effects of environmental stress which profoundly affect their lives.

What is happening is devastation on a grand scale. Added to the increasing number of environmental and human-caused disasters – cyclones in Asia, famines in Africa, deforestation in Amazonia – is the slow, insidious deterioration of local environments: trees cut down or damaged, soils lost or degraded, wells and watercourses dried up or polluted. Ozone depletion and the loss of biodiversity will bring

* There is no adequate term to describe collectively the poor countries in which Oxfam works. In this book 'Third World', 'the South', 'poor countries' and 'developing countries' have been used interchangeably in the text. They are taken to mean the poorer, less industrialised countries of the world, including the 43 Less Developed Countries which are so designated by the United Nations because of their low per capita incomes and little, if any, industrialisation.

disruptions to the global environment. Above all, climate change – the single most important influence on the earth – threatens a worldwide dislocation of weather, vegetation and cropping patterns.

Wasteful consumption of natural resources, especially energy resources by Northern countries, lies at the root of many of these problems and results in the pollution of land, air and water. Indeed, waste is an apt metaphor to describe what is happening to the earth and to the prospects for the poorest of its people. Both are being squandered.

It is increasingly clear that the environment, both globally and locally, in the North and the South, cannot be considered apart from the economic development which destroys or sustains it. Environmental degradation in many parts of the world is now seen as a major impediment to development of any kind.

This book is about Oxfam's perspective on these issues, drawing on its extensive field experience of working in relief and development with local organisations in 70 countries. In Chapter 1, which describes the links between poverty and the environment, and in subsequent chapters which deal with water, land, agriculture and forests (Chapters 3 to 6), the book looks at what is happening to the environments of poor people, and how they are responding to safeguard and improve the natural resources on which their survival depends. These chapters describe the work of Southern NGOs, including Oxfam's partners, who are increasingly active and effective at tackling poverty and environmental problems at the local level, while emphasising the need for national and international policy change to address the root causes of these problems.

Oxfam's experience of poverty and environmental degradation suggests that sustainable development is the only positive way forward:

development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.²

Chapter 2 discusses the meaning and experience of development for the people with whom Oxfam works, and introduces the idea of Primary Environmental Care as a practical approach to sustainable development. Primary Environmental Care, with its three essential components of people's empowerment, securing basic needs, and caring for the environment, is illustrated through specific examples in this and later chapters.

Chapter 7 deals with the environments of urban poverty, and the importance of community organisations in improving living conditions for poor people.

But local action alone is not enough. Accelerating the transition to sustainable development means that the obstacles to it, at national and international levels, have also to be tackled – urgently. This requires action to end armed conflict and increase democracy, popular

participation and good governance (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 looks at the factors involved in rapid population growth and emphasises the importance of tackling poverty, improving the education and status of women, and widening access to birth planning services. Alongside the need to reduce the inequalities within countries, is the urgent imperative of dealing with the structural inequities between North and South which stand in the way of sustainable development. Most important is the worsening economic situation of poor countries which are locked into a trade and debt crisis whilst investment and aid flows are falling. This is the subject of Chapter 10.

Because all the elements of the environment are interconnected, so too are the chapters of this book: their subdivision is, in many ways, arbitrary. The environment, especially for poor people, is impossible to categorise: it is the totality of the surroundings and circumstances which dominate every aspect of their lives – physical, social, economic and spiritual. As concern grows about acid rain, ozone depletion and global warming, people in the North are just beginning to see the interconnections. In an increasingly interdependent world, with the pressing need for much more global cooperation, there is growing recognition that sustainable development can only be achieved through far-reaching policy changes in international relations (especially on trade and debt) combined with a commitment to practical action locally.

Although this book will emphasise Southern perspectives on poverty and the environment, and the importance of action by governments, international agencies, NGOs and the business community, individuals in the rich world have a vital role to play in reducing the environmental problems of the poor world. It is their task not only to persuade Northern agencies to act with more responsibility and greater urgency, but also to adopt and promote personal styles of living which are more sustainable. Readers can participate in some of Oxfam's most successful 'environmental' ventures in the UK and Ireland – by recycling through the network of Oxfam shops, and through the Wastesaver Centre, and by buying goods through Oxfam's alternative trading scheme.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was just a beginning: the action must not stop with the Earth Summit in Rio. The urgent need is for governments, intergovernmental agencies, NGOs, the corporate sector – and individuals – to continue to commit themselves to carrying out the policies and actions required for sustainable development. The real evidence of that commitment will come when nations address the causes of poverty and environmental degradation, not just the symptoms. The final chapter of this book focuses on Oxfam's priorities for a fairer, more secure and sustainable world beyond the Earth Summit.



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Land degradation in Ethiopia. The hills were once well-wooded. Deforestation and over-cultivating the land has caused severe soil erosion.