

8-23-1990

Analysis: Rich, Poor Countries Must Work Jointly to Save Biosphere (Part 1)

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

Guest Author. "Analysis: Rich, Poor Countries Must Work Jointly to Save Biosphere (Part 1)." (1990).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/5101>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Analysis: Rich, Poor Countries Must Work Jointly to Save Biosphere (Part 1)

by Guest

Category/Department: Region

Published: 1990-08-23

The First and Third worlds have found separate ways to intensify the pollution that threatens the planet's life support systems. Ecological disaster looms down both roads, and an abrupt U-turn is needed. But there may be hope in a new and different application of advanced technology and a reordering of the world economy. If profit and greed have been the motor force in the past, at least let it now be fueled by the moral priority the moral imperative of truly serving human needs. New and different, indeed. This would involve substantial changes in the way we think, in our attitudes as individuals, institutions and nations.

But promising signs are evident in the growing anti-pollution movement of the industrialized world and in the continuing, though sometimes destructive, survival efforts of poor people in the Third World. It is no secret that the industrialized nations are major contributors to pollution. We all know that manufacturing generates large quantities of toxic waste while consumption of fossil fuels contaminates the air we breath. Fluoro-hydrocarbons assault the ozone layer, threatening the "greenhouse effect." And don't forget acid rain. And on and on. In the underdeveloped, or developing, world the picture is equally dismal. In Brazil, an increasingly impoverished population not to mention corporate exploitation slashes and burns the world's largest rain forest.

In the sub- Sahara, marginal land is overgrazed and the domain of desert spreads. Throughout the Third World, growing economic marginalization of agriculture and depletion of raw material resources have sent millions of migrants to squalid urban shantytowns where employment is occasional to non-existent. What are the solutions? It may be unpopular to suggest, especially to members of the anti-nuclear movement, that technology has a role to play. Images of Hiroshima, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, and the failure to provide for safe disposal of nuclear waste have stimulated the growth of a large anti-science constituency. Consider, however, that the planet might be much worse off if the industrial techniques of the 19th century had not undergone such massive sophistication.

The condition of Eastern Europe provides some hints in this regard. There, archaic methods of production have caused widespread blight exceeding the environmental destruction wrought in the Western world. Expanding the pollution level in Eastern Europe to a world scale would put us at the sorry pass that the so-called "ecofear" movement predicts for us in the future. But there are encouraging signs. Modern technology can and is beginning to make a significant and healing impact, despite the litany of industrial contributions to pollution. Technological advances have significantly reduced oil usage in the US from 0.35 tons per \$1,000 of output in 1973 to 0.24 tons today. Japan has done even better (0.33 tons in 1973 to 0.15 tons today). The platinum group metals used in jewelry and in catalytic converters for cars are now recovered with an efficiency of up to 93%.

High-tech drip irrigation in low humidity regions of developed countries not only reduces water consumption but also delays, and to a large extent prevents, soil fertility degradation caused by salinization. These developments are but a few of many which stem from corporate considerations that are economic in nature rather than ecological. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that it is within the competence of modern technology to slow, and even reverse, environmental degradation (see, Scientific American, September, 1989).

Offering an even greater contribution is "Green" politics, with its anti-pollution and resource preservation campaigns. Stiff anti-smog laws have converted Pittsburgh from among the most polluted to one of the cleanest cities in the nation. California voters have taxed themselves to provide funds to reduce pollution. Congress recently passed a bill to cut down on oil spills by requiring all petroleum tankers to be double-hulled. An international convention has agreed to eliminate production of chlorfluro- hydrocarbons compounds that attack the ozone layer. An international convention has banned destructive net fishing. At first glance, the thrashing survival efforts of the poor in the Third World would appear to be of little help for efforts to improve the environment.

By and large, poor people will not cease to struggle for a livelihood by whatever means, no matter the consequences. It is fruitless to tell the peasant not to carve out a plot from the virgin forest to feed his family. No one can forgo eating, even to benefit future generations. So Third World poverty will increase for decades to come as a major ecological issue affecting underdeveloped and developed countries alike, all people everywhere. Historically, the economy of the underdeveloped world has been dependent on agriculture, extraction of natural resources and, more recently, on labor intensive industries acting as accessories to the high-tech activities of the developed world.

With the technological revolution in the First World, both in agriculture and in industry, archaic methods of production and traditional raw materials no longer can provide even a minimum level of income for the majority of the people of the Third World. The major producers of wheat and other agricultural products are found in the developed world. Next, substitutes for essential products are being devised. Copper, for example, is being replaced by fiber-optics whose principal raw material is sand.

With the passage of time the Third World falls further behind as technical advances in industrialized nations multiply. Further, the massive profits extracted by multinationals in the Third World's labor intensive industries act as a powerful incentive to inhibit the introduction of advanced technologies. Meanwhile, Third World political leaders are desperate to create a modern industrial base, essential for their nations' future. Burdened by a debt that leaves little alternative, they are often driven to adopt draconian methods.

The governments of Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, among others, have embraced the "renewal" program of the International Monetary Fund, with its insufferable loan conditions. The IMF demands austerity programs that only deepen the shocking poverty of the majority of the population. Privatization of public services is often a requirement. This compounds already difficult access to health care while undermining public health medicine. Some IMF conditions also entail the abolition of most government-supported employment. Subsidies for basic foods are ended,

driving prices to world market levels without significant increments in wages. Perks used to entice foreign investors effectively derive from the living standards of the majority of these nations' populations.

-- End --