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Poverty and Environment

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Introduction

*Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody poor*
William Blake

This paper draws on conceptual work my colleague, David Hallows, and I have done on the idea of ‘environmental justice’ largely in a South African context where we explore the inter-relationship between power, poverty, and environment. Environmental justice might be broadly described as a rights or values based discourse which locates environmental degradation within a socio-political context. While ‘environmental justice’ might be said to have emerged as a more or less distinct discourse on environmental management, for the most part it has been defined and understood through examples of environmental **in**justice rather than a positive statement of the ‘ideal’ of environmental justice. The following is our initial attempt to provide a positive definition of environmental justice:

Environmental justice obtains where relations between people, within and between groups of people, and between people and their environments¹ are fair and equal, allowing all to define and achieve their aspirations without imposing unfair, excessive or irreparable burdens or externalities on others or their environments, now and in the future.

Even though such a statement itself relies on a number of underlying sub-definitions and assumptions (like what are ‘fair and equal’ relations, and what conditions could produce or sustain them), it is rather long and complex. A simpler rendition might be along the following lines:

Empowered people in relations of solidarity and equity with each other and in non-degrading and positive relationships with their environments.

Central to these working definitions, and to the idea of environmental justice, is the understanding that ‘environment’ chiefly expresses a set of relations - it is not something ‘out there’. This means that understanding ‘development’ is concerned with understanding how relations are established and maintained, what powers and interests they express and serve, and how they enhance or inhibit the possibilities of ‘a better life for all’ within the various environments where people live. This overcomes the dualism of ‘development’ and ‘environment’ characteristic of other major environmental management discourses.

The Charter for the Participation of People’s Organisations in Environmental Governance in Southern Africa (‘the Charter’, February 1997) expressed this view: “All people at all times live and work in relationship to their environments because their environments provide the resources by which they can live”.

Environmental injustice therefore refers principally to the experience of those who are excluded from the benefits of ‘development’ and/or who carry the burden of its costs and externalities. The agenda for environmental justice emerges therefore from a sound understanding of history and an analysis of the sites of those experiences, i.e., an analysis of the conditions of the poor and the marginalised in relation to

¹ natural, cultural, social, political and economic

how they live, work, and participate in social and institutional life. From a global perspective, Southern Africa might well describe such a site!

Analysis and a conceptual framework

Environmental injustice results from the unequal and unfair distribution of the benefits and costs (including environmental degradation) of development, recognising that such inequality is produced within and by relations of power. Defining environmental justice makes clear however that it is not achieved through 'equal and fair' distribution of those benefits and costs but rather goes to the heart of how power relations define and re-produce 'development' itself. Thus one must ask of 'development': who benefits, who loses and who 'did' it – that is, who are the beneficiaries, who are the subjects and who are the agents of environmental injustice. The question of who, however, is embedded in multiple relationships and it is through an understanding of how environmental injustice is produced that these relationships can be made visible.

Mechanisms of environmental injustice

It is proposed that the most important means, or mechanisms, by which environmental injustice is produced, are: externalisation of costs, enclosure, and exclusion.

Externalisation of costs

To externalise something is to give it 'external existence'. Conventional economics, markets and accounting systems tend to externalise a range of costs and benefits because they are not generally given monetary value and accounted for. Social and environmental impacts associated with development are clear examples. When they are not accounted for or valued, these impacts inevitably occur either as free benefits to the producer or as uncompensated costs, carried either by the environment, or any body bearing the remediation costs (usually government and ultimately the public), or people disadvantaged by the effects (either through their loss of a resource damaged by pollution, or through their health).

Various valuation techniques have been developed to estimate the value in monetary terms of such social and environmental externalities². Using such techniques it is possible to try and estimate the 'Total Economic Value' of resources.

Shadow pricing can also be derived for otherwise uncompensated costs by ascribing monetary value to impacts and their incidence on people. For example, where a causal link is established between a particular pollutant source and negative health impacts, the costs can implied in, e.g.,

- a. 'defensive expenditure': i.e., an estimate of the expenditures which community members might have had to make to mitigate against the effects of the pollutant source. This may also estimate the expenditures which would have been expected under better resourced social conditions, but which were not made due to poverty and lack of income;
- b. productivity loss: i.e., economic values attached to any loss in working productivity as a result of the pollutant source, in particular, lost working days, as well as any loss in livelihood income due to declining quality or productivity of an environmental resource, like a river system; and

² These include for example, contingent valuation methods, dynamic opportunity cost valuation, hedonic pricing, input and output valuation, panel valuation, threshold valuation, travel-cost method.

- c. 'hedonic pricing': Residents in a polluted area also bear the cost of a generally poor environmental quality and the associated loss of amenity and recreational value. In order to estimate the total value of lost environmental quality, one can make use of land value depreciation approaches. This approach would assess the discount in market-based property prices in the surrounding or affected areas as a result of the proximity of the pollutant source.

Costs borne by 'the environment' (and usually functioning as a free benefit to a producer) can be valued through the surrogate measures of, for example:

- The costs of control of ongoing pollution and cleaning up historical pollution
- The difference between what is paid for waste disposal and the real costs of safe disposal;
- The costs of retrofitting or replacing the plant;
- The costs of introducing proper health and safety;
- The price difference between environmentally unfriendly and friendly non-labour production inputs;
- The difference in per unit production costs – particularly where environmentally sound production requires more labour.

Loss of natural environments is usually more difficult to calculate because monetary values are often not attributable to what has been lost or what is intangible. In addition to the techniques discussed above, attempts have been made to value such losses especially in terms of the 'non-use value' of a resource.

Subsidies can be deployed as tools for the externalisation of costs. A subsidy is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "money granted esp. by the State to keep down the price of commodities etc.". Subsidies are important, often hidden, mechanisms where producers gain free benefit, funded by public money, and often at the externalised expense of people and environments. Subsidies and related government measures can also underwrite the risk element of a venture or industry (again with public monies) to secure private profitability for the beneficiary. In South Africa's apartheid history for example, large sectors of the white farming industry were subsidised to secure political support, encouraging hopelessly inappropriate farming on marginal land subject to periodic drought. Will more recent supportive interventions carried out in the name of industrial development (e.g., SDIs) or agricultural (indeed rural) development (e.g., emergent farmer support) tend in the same direction?

Enclosure

Enclosure involves the appropriation of a common resource. It therefore implies the dispossession of those who previously had access to the resource.

The main forms are:

- Conquest (or forced appropriation): Conquest here is used as a metaphor. It involves the grabbing of a common asset by force, whether by the state or by private interests, and legitimisation of the new possessor by the state.
- Technological enclosure: This refers to instances where the impact of the use of a powerful technology results in the effective monopolisation of a resource. This frequently involves the depletion of the resource so that less powerful technologies are no longer able to access it, e.g. a powerful water pump is installed which subsequently lowers the water table it draws on with negative consequences for the availability of water from village wells.

- Commodification or Monetisation: Rights in common resources are generally defined by something analogous to citizenship rather than by money. Where a monetary value is placed on the resource, the poor are excluded. In short, it becomes a commodity, and access is conditional on individual purchasing power in the market. Privatisation is an increasingly common mechanism of commodification. Commodification also tends to undermine ethics and customs that previously regulated the use of a resource. As a commodity, its trade and exchange is more likely to be subject to the rules of the market-place.

Exclusion

Exclusion may relate both to institutions of markets and of governance— implicitly reflected in the phrase: ‘the poor and the marginalised’. Given the weight of economic forces in shaping broader social institutions and relations, these two aspects of exclusion frequently reinforce each other to describe the multiple weakness of the poor - they are denied access to, and control over, both material resources and the social resources, processes and institutions which define and reinforce their ‘place’. Exclusion denotes the ways in which social institutions define (and limit) access to resources - institutions of patriarchy for example operate at all levels to exclude women from the macro- to micro-level (so poor women are excluded to a greater degree than either the poor in general and women in general).

There are important parallels between the mechanism of exclusion described here and the framework developed by Forsyth *et al* (1998) to articulate an ‘environmental entitlements’ approach to understanding poverty-environment linkages (Leach *et al* 1997 a and b). Adapted from Sen’s work on entitlements in the context of famine (e.g. Sen 1981), their approach shifts the emphasis from questions of resource availability to those of access, control and management.

Implications

Our colleague, Sola’s, paper points to most of the key areas of the ‘working out’ of these mechanisms in the Southern African environment and, as such are a useful platform from which to probe further. We argue that probing further is necessary because the causes which Sola posits are not root causes. Of nearly all of them listed in his paper (at p3, Sola 2001), one could and should ask: “What caused that?”:

- “Inadequate access to employment opportunities.
- Inadequate access to land and capital, and limited access to credit by the poor majority.
- Inadequate access to the means of supporting rural development in poor regions.
- Inadequate access to markets where the poor can sell goods and services.
- Low endowment of human capital.
- Limited choices to livelihood options.
- Overdependence on one form of economic activity, in particular agriculture, whose performance is governed by water availability.
- Natural disasters such as droughts and floods, for example, the February 2000 floods in Mozambique, parts of Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These destroyed the livelihoods of over a million people, leaving them with no food or shelter and other essential infrastructure.
- Destruction of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and reduced productivity.
- Inadequate assistance for those living at the margins and those victimised by transitory poverty.
- Lack of participation by and failure to draw the poor in the design of development programmes.”

If, as we argue, development is, *inter alia*:

- Framed by the social reproduction of power in history,
- Pre-eminently concerned and driven by the accumulation of wealth, and
- Implicated in the phenomena of exclusion, poverty and environmental degradation,

then, the pursuit of environmental justice goes beyond mitigating environmental impacts and ‘balancing’ economic growth and environmental protection. Rather it implies that

- a. poverty and environmental injustice are not the condition/s of being without development but precisely its consequence
- b. the poverty/environment complex which has resulted from Southern Africa’s history and which defines the real world of the majority of its people, can only be satisfactorily transformed through a fundamental re-organisation of the relations of power which currently direct the distribution of development’s costs and benefits, and
- c. the present global context, where an elite 20% consume 80% of the world’s environmental resources, makes poverty eradication and environmental justice an impossibility, and so long as globalisation proceeds on the assumptions of market-based economic ‘growth’, liberalisation and marketisation it will continue to re-produce poverty and injustice. In short it’s a political task.

But knowing we have to change the world and also knowing a little about how it actually works, presents policy makers with a profoundly difficult challenge.

Policy recommendations

In the interests of initiating discussion, we suggest some broad parameters below.

Multi-layered

While poverty and environmental injustice are experienced in particular localities by particular people, their causation is seldom only local. Policy and project interventions targeted at poverty and environmental injustice can, and ultimately should, be driven by and impact positively on the interests of real people in real places but micro-level projects which do not articulate with macro-level issues are no more than window dressing while the real business of ‘development’ goes on as usual. Of course the same is also true of a fascination with macro-level policy which fails to change either:

- a. the lives and environments of poor and marginalised people, or
- b. the practices of the powerful which re-produce poverty and environmental injustice.

At the local level there are people in environments so impoverished that waiting for policy makers to change the world is not an ethical option. We would argue that local level interventions with the poor and excluded could be understood as ‘hedging’ against the blasts of an inhospitable, indeed pernicious, global market-driven environment: reducing vulnerability to shocks and disaster; increasing self-reliance, livelihoods diversity, food security; building the capacities and assets required for truly local economic development (perhaps at least partly ‘outside’ the market) and human being and dignity.

Work at this level could appropriately be pursued within the sustainable livelihoods framework³ - provided it is applied with commitment to the whole framework and is not allowed to deteriorate into cute micro-focussed poverty projects which run shy of tackling macro-level livelihoods constraints and/or which fail the sustainability test⁴. Building sustainable livelihoods as ‘hedgies’ against or outside of the unsustainable options presented by development orthodoxy also holds open the future of ‘development’ to other possibilities in the future – it can create new ‘facts on the ground’ by building a real constituency with an interest in securing environmental justice and really sustainable development through transformation of the existing macro-context into one that supports these goals rather than inherently undermines them.

Between the micro- and national levels within countries of Southern Africa there are needs for equally demanding and comprehensive policy support. Institutional, policy, market and other reforms must flow from robust and creative debate informed not only by lessons and insights gleaned from the local-level (an injunction of the sustainable livelihoods approach) but also from the broad range of public interest formations. A diverse and vibrant civil society empowered for effective advocacy through well-grounded and sound intellectual work and an enabling institutional and political context, is an essential component. For the determination of the ‘public good’ and for the ability to implement reform with determination and purpose, strong, capacitated and democratically accountable government and state machinery must also be supported.

Where these issues intersect with the international and global contexts of trade and politics, impediments to justice and poverty eradication must be addressed. Given the comprehensive nature of the agenda, these will no doubt be many but some key issues are well known, e.g., crippling debt, structural adjustment policies, and adverse terms of trade. But wouldn’t it be helpful if there were greater consistency between development aid policies supportive of these aims (from micro to national and regional) and actual development practice in donor countries and regions? Beyond window dressing for

³ We would acknowledge that ‘sustainable livelihoods’ thinking is itself debated and relatively new but nonetheless believe it is sufficiently robust, useful and comprehensive in this context. Its relatively comprehensive character also make it potentially complex and demanding.

⁴ Sustainability must be addressed if poverty reduction and development are to be meaningful and avoid debilitating patterns of dependence. There are a number of recognised dimensions to sustainability, including:

- Resilience in the face of shocks and stresses (e.g., how vulnerable are the livelihoods to ‘natural’ events like drought or floods?);
- Dependence on external factors is avoided - or if not entirely avoidable, then that relationship itself should be economically and institutionally stable or sustainable (e.g., is donor funding or NGO support the only basis for continuation of certain livelihoods?);
- The natural resource base is at minimum not rendered unproductive in the long run (e.g., are soil quality or water resources being looked after for the long term?);
- Does not weaken others’ livelihoods options - now or in the future (e.g., are women or youth being trained in the skills that will enable future participation in a set of livelihoods?).

Sustainable systems address environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, social sustainability, and institutional sustainability. It is likely that there will be trade-offs in selection and implementation of livelihood strategies but awareness of these factors will help identify needs for impact assessments to assist decision-making and the selection and implementation of activities. (Butler: 1999).

business as usual to continue, what value is there in donor supported livelihoods projects for the rural poor in Southern Africa when, according to one recent study, rich countries spend enough on subsidising their farmers to fly every single cow in the west around the world first class? That's not only a huge waste of western taxpayers' money but a huge cost to developing world countries which could be producing food for western markets more efficiently and at less cost to the environment - where land is cheaper, agriculture can be extensive rather than intensive⁵.

Integrated

...

Open-ended and flexible

...

If Southern Africa is itself a site of environmental injustice, and if SADC's policy proposals listed by Sola are more or less on track, then perhaps the policy challenge is really a Northern one.

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⁵ Denny, C. 2001.