

The challenges of addressing poverty and environment linkages in South Africa

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Contribution to debates on the WSSD 2002.

A roundtable experts dialogue was convened by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) in part preparations for the review of Agenda 21 and the 2002 Earth Summit, to be held in Johannesburg. The main aim of the roundtable was to examine the links between poverty and the environment. This comes at a time when the issue of poverty reduction is likely to be a central focus for debate at the next World Summit on Sustainable Development to be held in South Africa. Poverty reduction is a major priority for all the important multi-lateral agencies such as the World Bank, IMF, UN, and is also set as a key development objective for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD countries have also set an ambitious target of reducing global poverty by half by the year 2015.

Discussions on how best to tackle poverty in South Africa, is not a new debate. The first wide-scale review of poverty in the country was conducted in the 1980's. This review was conducted under the auspices of Wilson and Ramphela with the funding support of the Carnegie Foundation. The second nationwide study was the National Poverty Study conducted under the auspices of the President Thabo Mbeki in 1997, in his capacity as Deputy President. This culminated in the compilation of the report: "Poverty and Inequality in South Africa". And soon thereafter these were followed by poverty hearings convened by the South African Non-Governmental Coalition (SANGOCO), in different parts of the country. Most recently, the national Cabinet was also privy to debates about whether a basic income grant (BIG) of R100 should be provided to poor households.

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A special committee of inquiry, into a comprehensive system of Social Security, was established by the Department of Social Welfare under the chairpersonship of Professor Vivian Taylor (Pretoria News, 6 July 2001). The committee is deliberating over the cost of administering such a grant scheme, as opposed to that of providing food stamps to the poor. The cost of administering the grant system is estimated at about R40 billion per annum. NGO lobby groups estimate that about 22 million people in South Africa live in abject poverty – almost half the population. Their estimates further reveal that, on average, poor households survive on R144 per month. The earning of the poorest of the poor internationally averages about R200/month, which is close to the World Bank poverty datum figures of the poorest of the poor earning of \$1 per day. The discussion on whether a BIG will be effective or not is generating renewed debate on whether a social welfare or a development assistance approach to poverty alleviation, are the best ways of tackling poverty.

The reviews show poverty to be the highest in rural areas, where about 60-70% of South Africa's poor are located. The poorest of the poor are to be found in the provinces occupied by the former homelands, where, due to apartheid laws to this day some 12.7 million people or 32% of the population live on 13% of the land. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the poverty level in the country is on the rise. While more systematic studies are needed to confirm this, changes in South Africa's economy has seen an increase in jobs for the black middle class, but greater job losses for workers who are unskilled or semi-skilled. South Africa has perhaps overtaken Brazil in being the most unequal society.

The tackling of poverty in the country has been characterised by parceling out programmes and interventions through different government agencies. The interventions are predominantly in the form of welfare grants to poor communities. Developmental programmes, such as the promotion of small and medium enterprise development, do not seem to make the kind of dent to unemployment that is necessary. Surprisingly too, an issue that has been given very little attention is the power of social organisation, social capital and the support of extended family systems as safety nets.

The views expressed here are not that of the IUCN, but the opinion of the author(s)

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Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the capability of households to deal with different degrees of poverty is also dependent on the ability to establish sound social networks between families, friends and kinship groups in both rural and urban areas. It may also shed light as to why some families are persistently poor while others face poverty episodically.

Perhaps a more comprehensive strategy which integrates the value of both welfare and developmental interventions into one concerted national programme, which helps monitor progress may give a better indication as to whether the objectives set in tackling poverty are being met or not. Perhaps South Africa needs a national poverty reduction strategy – incidentally, such strategies are a requirement from lending agencies such as the World Bank. This could greatly assist in improving the interventions made in targeting poverty reduction. A social pact between various social players such as NGOs, labour unions, farmers, the private sector, and the government are also needed to better channel different efforts so that the approaches are made more coherent. The private sector in South Africa already contributes about R1 billion towards corporate social responsibility activities.

The ability of households to mitigate poverty is both an outcome of having sufficient income, and being able to use non-cash based resources to support families. Work done in rural areas, by Programme on Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape, shows that natural resources contribute significantly to the level of household security. It is estimated that wild-resources such as foods, fibres and structural material have been roughly valued to contribute, in cash terms, about R5000 per year to household income. And, if one takes into account the total number of households in rural areas, then the value of natural resource endowments or entitlements can potentially be in the range of R15 billion per annum. This is significant for poor families. However, with increased poverty there is a greater reliance on the natural resource base, and consequently issues of sustainability and possible conflicts over resource access become major issues. Pressure on natural resources is exacerbated in the former homelands where population densities continue to be high, given that land reform has not fully taken off. More research and improved technologies that will assist poor people in managing over-utilised natural resources will not only ensure ecological integrity but will also continue to maintain existing livelihoods, especially if there is a continued dependence on

key natural resources. This may not only be true for rural areas, but poor households in peri-urban and urban areas also use wild resources such as thatching, wood, and wild plants for medicinal purposes and food. The nature of this dependency on the natural resource base in both urban and rural areas requires more study.

In the relationship between poverty and the environment it becomes increasingly more obvious that the two are intertwined. In an urban based context the use of coal based cooking and heating utensils contributes a great deal more to household pollution than ambient pollution in the general atmosphere. The effects of household pollution are more immediate and visible. Improvements in basic services; access to affordable sustainable technologies; electrification and design of houses; will go a long way in reducing household pollution, and health costs. All these factors impact on household disposal income and spending patterns, and will assist households to spend more money on good education, nutritious food and health care. For instance, the spread of cholera in Kwa-Zulu Natal is attributed to inadequate service delivery in areas where the cholera epidemic hit. A social activist recently quipped that the cost of intervention to eradicate cholera is equal to the cost of providing water and sanitation services that would last ten years.

The South African constitution and much of its policies and legislation enshrine a rights-based approach to dealing with issues of inequity, injustice and disparities in opportunity and income. There are unique attempts being made in the world to empowering poor communities to seek economic opportunity and the right to basic services. This informs much of the debates held in the country around issues of free water, access to land, housing, adequate health services and education. The rights based approach was first propounded in the RDP, and many of its ideas are now enshrined in the constitution and in government policies. The rights base approach places the meeting of human needs as the central focus when assessing the trade-off between human needs and charting out major developmental initiatives for the country. The rights based approach is central to the ethos of our democracy. This was recently demonstrated when a group of homeless people who lost their homes in a flood, were given temporary shelter on State in the rich suburb of Kyalami. The Courts ruled that the State has an obligation to provide shelter to the destitute, and therefore overruled the right of residence that the settlement violated environmental rights - the argument put

forward to have the shelters removed. This rings an echo to economists such as Amartya Sen, who point out that: “Democracy, which is valuable in its own right, may not be especially effective economically all the time, but it comes into its own when a crisis threatens and the economically dispossessed need the voice that democracy gives them. Among the lessons of the Asian economic crises is the importance of social safety net, democratic rights and political voice. Political deprivation can reinforce economic destitution” (Sen, CNN/Time, May 2000).

The conditions of poverty are so dire that perhaps for the first time in the history of South Africa, following the democratic elections in 1994, the number of chronically poor people is to double or even triple. Chronic poverty is defined as households experiencing persistent conditions of poverty over protracted periods of time. Indications of this is the continuing and increasing unemployment - and since 1994 about 500 000 million jobs have been shed by the formal sector. South Africa has the largest number of AIDS cases in sub-Saharan Africa, which is incapacitating millions and due to the slow pace of land reform it has meant that the kind of agrarian reforms that are necessary to tackle rural based poverty are not taking shape. Poverty is a national crisis, and one might add that the failure to deal with poverty is criminal as it has consequences for all South African citizens. One of the cherished symbols of democracy is the view that democracy provides a platform for the voiceless to exercise their voice. However, poverty in South Africa is eerily silent, hidden, and voiceless, with the exception of the occasional land invasion. And, as civil society’s organizational capacity weakens, so too is there the danger that the silence will grow.