

Linking ecological and economic security

Written by Barbara Harriss-White

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BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE, MAR 31 2009

Concerns that the pursuit of a low carbon global economy may lead to further deprivation in the developing world rest on a false assumption. 'Low carbon life styles' are already lived by the poor in the 'South'. It is rich countries, accounting for most of the pollution, which face an unprecedented challenge in adapting their ways of life to allow human societies to survive on the planet. In fact, attitudes in rich countries towards the impending ecological crisis have gradually changed. Major political and business interests have evolved from denial, to recognising 'affordable solutions', and now to an agenda of mitigation. But while it's obvious that global public action is needed, the governments of the ten major polluting countries have yet to act in a concerted way that is adequate to the problem.

They have been missing the point. The reason atmospheric CO₂ continues to rise is now due to the growth logic and path dependence of the global capitalist economy. Policies responding to the ecological crisis that help "green" the rich without further harming the poor must therefore stem from recognition that the capitalism that creates wealth, waste and pollution also creates poverty. "Green" responses to the poverty of the world's poorest inhabitants must focus on these poverty-creating processes and their links if solutions to both global poverty and climate change are to be effective. Outlined below are some poverty processes and suggestions for green political responses:

Natural resources

Corporations and individual capitalists create poverty when seizing essential resources such as land and biomass, minerals and water. People displaced by development have to be adequately resettled. Start-up capital and credit unconnected to loans on dwellings should be provided for their businesses.

Self-employment and small-scale enterprise

Preventing the expansion of small-scale production and self-employment perpetuates poverty. Countering the many processes involved requires recognising work-sites, and combating extortion in rents, interest rates and prices. To release the vitality of small-scale enterprise, energy and capital need taxing, while labour and recycling need incentivising. Efficiency in energy and resources needs to be the top development priority.

Labour rights

The pressure to reduce costs intensifies the exploitation of workers, driving down wages and damaging work environments. To protect workers, the ILO's principles of Decent Work need to be upheld and income guarantees put in place. The collective and cooperative organisation of production should not be penalised.

Labour-friendly green innovation systems

To respond to practices that cut costs through technological change, outsourcing, and labour displacement, a 'green innovation system' is overdue. Educational curricula should be radically transformed to promote green innovation and award it social and political kudos. International public buyouts of patents on renewable energy and on efficient technologies for energy, water and materials would help transfer technology to developing countries. A 'national service' in recycling and a 'war against all waste' would help transform the economy as well as public ethical

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consciousness.

Toxic products, the arms industry and dangerous conflict

The production of toxic products which harm poor people disproportionately needs well-enforced regulation. The arms industry drives poverty and destruction when financing, equipping, and encouraging the outbreak of wars. Social resources need committing to the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Crises and public goods and rights

Economic and financial crises pauperise people through bankruptcies, lay-offs and the destruction of savings. The state needs to maintain ownership of, and assure the provision of, public goods and rights protecting people against poverty and insecurity. The material preconditions for the enjoyment of freedom involve food, water, clothing, housing, sanitation, drainage – and healthcare, education and employment. Global finance should be regulated to achieve these objectives. Their production is at the heart of economic development.

Growth, waste and pollution

Waste is the by-product of economic development. Untreated waste is dangerous to those living nearby. Waste gases that are warming the planet are already harming those living at its ecological margins and least responsible for global warming. So the attack on poverty-creating waste also requires energy, transport and environmental protection infrastructure to be redeveloped using materials-efficient technologies, regulated in the public interest.

Politicise ecological security

The physical cycles that are involved in climate change, and in responding to it, are incomparably longer than electoral-democratic cycles which dominate party-political policy making and their vista of practical action. Many technological solutions exist already, but policies for their development are characterised by instability, idiosyncrasy and slow implementation. Some way of handling ecological security independently of electoral politics, perhaps in the way military security is treated, must be developed democratically and made the object of a binding moral consensus.

Barbara Harris-White is professor of development studies at the University of Oxford. This article has been republished with permission from Policy Network's 'Progressive Governance' website. We encourage you to visit the website and participate in the debate.