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## Poverty and environmental inequality in India



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# 29. Poverty and environmental inequality in India

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*In considering pollutants, it is important to distinguish between the 'survival' emissions of the poorest – for example, their use of polluting cookstoves which cause severe health damage – and the 'luxury' emissions generated by rich and powerful elites to maintain their consumer lifestyles. It is also important to acknowledge that current systems of water and waste management are capital-intensive and create divisions between rich and poor. The current discourse on environment and development must be reframed so that it is built on the premise that sustainable development needs to be equitable. In other words, growth has to be affordable and inclusive.*

The world's poor are the worst affected by environmental degradation. They live in poverty. They have the highest exposure to pollution; the world's highest mortality rates in children are attributed to drinking dirty water. They breathe polluted air. And forest degradation leads to the exacerbation of poverty as the poor cannot get the materials they need for survival. Yet researchers maintain that the poor, despite their intensive use of natural resources, are not responsible for environmental degradation. It is the extensive use of resources for commerce by the rich, involving energy-intensive and extractive industrial methods, that is primarily responsible for degradation (Agarwal, 1985).

Today's question is different: can environmental management work if it does not address inequality?

We need to distinguish between the 'survival' emissions of poor people with no alternative but to walk long distances to collect firewood, sweep the forest floor for leaves and twigs, and do back-breaking work to collect and dry cow-dung, all for some 'oil' to cook their food, and the 'luxury' emissions of those who drive to work and live in air-conditioned comfort.

This distinction is necessary for policy and action. Otherwise, an important opportunity – provided to us by the poorest of the world – to reduce emissions in the future will be lost. Lost, once again, to the ignorance of the international community regarding how the other half lives and the arrogance of powerful polluters.

## Cookstoves

Let us be clear: the poorest of the world, who use polluting cookstoves because they cannot afford commercial fossil fuel, provide our only real space today to avert climate change. The energy trajectory is such that these families, when they move out of poverty, will also move out of cooking on this biomass stove. They will walk up the fossil-fuel stairway to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). Every time they move away, as they must, one less family will be using renewable energy; one more family will begin polluting with long-term greenhouse gas emissions. The difference is that black soot pollutes locally – it literally kills the women who cook – but has a relatively short life in the atmosphere. Unlike carbon dioxide, it disappears in a few weeks.

The poorest people, therefore, provide the world with the perfect opportunity to leapfrog from using polluting but renewable energy, to using energy that is renewable, but clean for them and the world. It is this objective that must drive our efforts, not a plan to pick on the poorest so that we can continue to pollute.

## Urban air pollution: equity in road space

It is also clear that solutions to urban air pollution cannot be viable unless they take into account the inequities in current policy.

Today a small but growing number of people in the cities of the South drive a car. In Delhi, for instance, it is only 15 per cent (Wilbur Smith Associates, 2008). But the cost of their driving is high in terms of air pollution, and the congestion is crippling. The question is how to combat air pollution as more and more people drive in Delhi and other increasingly car-clogged cities. Is it possible to plan for the remaining 85 per cent? Is there space on the road, or in the already polluted 'air shed', for the cars of the many?

Clearly there is not. Unless we reinvent urban mobility on an unprecedented scale, we cannot have clean air. Understanding this, the Delhi High Court ruled in 2010 that Delhi roads need to be planned taking into account 'equity of use' (Manushi Sangathan v. Govt of Delhi, 2010). Today, the bulk of Delhi's population walks, cycles or takes a bus. Most people do this because they are poor. The question is whether these poor-rich cities of the emerging world can reinvent, upgrade and greatly improve urban public transportation systems so that the majority won't need to use cars so much. In this way, cities do not become car-clogged and then attempt to accommodate buses. They build differently today, for tomorrow.

In short, the policy approach to combat air pollution must move from cleaning the tailpipe to planning for affordable and inclusive mobility solutions. This is not easy. But what is clear is that solutions must work for the poor, for them to work for the rich.

### Water pollution: the sewage of all must be treated to clean the rivers

Indian rivers are increasingly polluted, but the question is, how can we clean up when large numbers of people are unconnected to sanitation and do not have access to clean water? Our report, *Excreta Matters* (Narain, 2012) showed why policy needs to be changed. We find that current systems of water and waste management are capital-intensive and create divisions between rich and poor.

The state has limited resources and can only invest in providing for some people – invariably the rich and not the poor. But if only part of the city has access to sanitation and underground sewage disposal, pollution control will not work. The treated waste of the few will be mixed with the untreated waste of many. The end result is pollution.

The standard technocratic response to fixing this requires providing sanitation and connected drainage, so that waste is intercepted and taken to a sewage treatment plant, which is designed to clean waste and discharge the effluents to a river or water body, which in turn has the ability to assimilate and clean the residue. This is very complex and expensive. Current financial and technical constraints will not allow this to happen for all. This is because the more water we use in our houses, the more waste we discharge. The water inequity in Delhi is legendary. Parts of the city are flush with over 200 litres of water per capita, and the rest get a few drops. But what we don't realize is that those who use water, and discharge the waste which ends up in the river, do not pay for the full cost of water or its treatment. In other words, we do not internalize the negative externalities of our water pollution, its economic, social and environmental costs.

The fact is that most governments are designing expensive and technically inappropriate water and waste systems for their teeming cities. These unaffordable systems pipe water for long distances, which adds to the costs of distribution and worse, increases water loss. Then they take back the waste, clean it and pipe it even longer distances. The cost of electricity for pumping, and even more for the exorbitant cost of building and then maintaining this elaborate infrastructure, means that only a small proportion of the urban population will ever be served by adequate water and waste services of this type.

In many cases, municipal governments do not charge enough for the water they supply, or for the waste they collect or treat. The relatively rich users of this system of underground drainage are then subsidized. But this also means that governments do not have sufficient resources to build, operate or maintain the system for all. This is the 'political economy of water supply and defecation' where the rich are subsidized in the name of the poor.

If this approach is not reworked and the technology for water supply and waste management is not reinvented, it will not meet the needs of all. As a result, rivers will continue to be polluted and there will be a higher health burden of polluted water on poor users, while the rich will have to pay higher costs for treating waste water for their drinking water needs. The answer is to have affordable solutions which are also environmentally, socially and technologically sustainable.

In this way, the current discourse on environment and development must be reframed on the premise that sustainable development is not possible if it is not equitable. In other words, growth has to be affordable and inclusive. This also means that the developing world cannot follow the incremental route of the rich world, which has invested in pollution control as it has discovered problems.

But the most important priority is to rearticulate that the environmental challenge is not technocratic but political. We cannot neuter the politics of access, justice and rights and hope to fix environmental problems.

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