

Development Ethics and Political Ecology

Linkages of Poverty, Environment and Development

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Abstract— The concept of Political ecology considers ecological studies as not being political neutral and is important because it implies that while studying development, environmental concerns and problems, there is a need to view them from a broader social and political context. It therefore doesn't not overlook the role of politics both at local and international level in determining resource use, which can create wealth for some and increased poverty for others especially in cases of asymmetries of power. Development ethics is also concerned with social and human dimensions of development seeking to incorporate human values in development to curb the challenges that might be posed by development. Both political ecology and development ethics can therefore give an insight into the linkages of poverty, environment and development.

Keywords- *political ecology, development, sustainability, social context*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early post-war period development was based on solely economic terms; Economic aid introduced by the American Marshall Plan rebuilding Europe in the wake of World War II (Bräutigam and Knack 2004:256), set the precedent that development could be fuelled simply by large money injections. But the relationship between economic growth and environmental conservation is highly controversial (Kristof 2000 in Moe 2007: 2). Today, there is consensus among scholars that development ethics should embrace each individual context holistically, acknowledging that “political, economic and social factors affect environmental issues” (Øyhus 2011:1). Global frameworks of development ethics is a recognition that international development strategies are not value free (Øyhus 2011). Development ethics are continuously influenced by elements from emerging academic subfields, adjusting to correspond with the present dominating perceptions of “good” development. An emerging trend within the current development discourse is the importance of promoting human development in synergy with sustainable environmental management. “A consensus exists that development institutions, projects and aid givers should seek strategies in which both human well-being and a healthy environment jointly exist and are mutually reinforcing” (Crocker 2004:7).

Current political ecologists and modern promoters of development ethics can thus be argued to be a more up-to-date approach towards achieving sustainable development. While Our Common Future (Brundtland 1987) was an intro to these current trends, it was still mainly based on economics and market demands. Now the system of supply and demand, and the politics of such are seen in a much more critical light. “Political ecology seeks to analyze the influence that societies, states, businesses, international economic structures and geo-political relations have on environmental problems and also how these organizations and institutions may influence policy at different levels” (Øyhus 2011: para 3). There are however, strong economic incentives involved in politics that undermines the interlinkage between economic, human and environmental development. Even though people's welfare is supposed to be the core issue in development, this is not always the case. While environmental and human investments are known to be strengthening each other and proven to be economical beneficial in the long run, some developing countries still develops solely on economic terms. The reason for this is complex, based on a correlation between political, economic, environmental, social, historical and cultural aspects. Political ecology is a tool for understanding how environmental politics affects people. Development ethics are used to understand the relation between the historical, cultural and environmental management and its effect on politics.

The first part of the paper will concentrate on elaborating upon the dominating values affecting global development ethics. In particular, power asymmetry related to shaping the ethics of development will be thoroughly debated. The latter part of the assignment will analyze how current development ethical perspectives can give us a better insight into the linkages between poverty, environment and development. Special emphasis will placed upon analyzing how elements from *political ecology* materialize in the current developing discourse and development management.

II. CURRENT DEVELOPMENT ETHICS

Development ethics derives from the ideas of what is concerned to be “good” development; in correspondence with the words of Goulet; “Development is an ambiguous adventure born of tensions between *what* goods are sought and

how these are obtained" (Goulet 1997: 1161). New trends within development ethics reveal an increased tendency of a holistic approach, linking human to the ecosystem. The Mérida Declaration from 1989, states the importance of addressing the relation between human and nature in international development ethics: "The recognition of a new relation of human beings with nature, facilitating responsible use, respectful of biological cycles and the equilibrium of ecosystems--especially those of tropical forests--and in solidarity with future generations" (IDEA 1989: para6).

Current trends of development reflect a similar ethical profile towards reaching sustainable development; a two-edged approach where both human development and environmental issues are given attention. As an example, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) represent a broad approach towards promoting sustainable development, targeting both social and economic challenges simultaneously. Additionally, an increased global focus upon the values of individual freedom within development ethics can be defined as a driving force towards community based conservation. These examples state a clear distance to the objectives of development in the post war period, motivated primarily by generating economic profit and progress.

III. POLITICAL ECOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Political ecologists seek to analyze the influence that societies, states, businesses, international, economic structures and geo-political power relations have on environmental problems and how these organizations and institutions may influence policy at different levels" (Øyhus 2011:1). In other words this view gives an opportunity to look into social, economic and political dimensions and see how they contribute to environmental degradation, poverty and affect sustainable development. Duraiappah (1998) states that the Brundtland Commission defining poverty alone as a trigger to environmental degradation, reflects an oversimplified picture of the driving forces of environmental degradation. Rather he advocates the importance of a more nuanced pattern of interconnected driving forces, stating that "in the case of water pollution, commercial agents are driven primarily by profit motives [Davidson et al., 1992]. On the other hand, the low-income groups pollute because of a lack of provision of proper sanitation and drinking water facilities by governmental agencies" (Duraiappah 1998:2175). This example suggests a notion of approaching environmental degradation as a circular phenomenon, rather than a linear chain of cause and effects. For the right policies to be implemented there is a need to understand the nature, relationship and cause of problems.

For intense, the recognition of the unique value of the forest has reached the global arena, since deforestation is of great concern to conservation and international agendas because of the potential loss of species, its impacts on the rights and needs of forest people and its impact on sustainable development (Adams 2009: 244). The global effects of pollution and biodiversity loss in developing countries have been recognized by environmentalists for a long time. It is not

until recently, that the profitable aspect of human and environmental investments has been acknowledged.

Political ecology is a *political* tool and is thus not unaffected by asymmetrical power relations (Øyhus 2011). Recently, Tanzania got the world's attention when releasing plans of building a highway through the national park Serengeti, possibly effecting the preservation of wildlife (Gettleman 2010). The debate has revealed polarized interests between national Tanzanian politics and Western ecological scientism. While Western voices uphold the importance of ecological preservation, the Tanzanian government justifies the road ahead as an improvement of infrastructure that will join the country and promote human development. The spokesman of the Tanzanian President, Salvator Rweyemamu, used these words in describing the conflicting argumentation: "You guys [The West] always talk about animals, but we need to think about people" (Rweyemamu in Gettleman 2010: para 8).

This example highlights a conflicting aspect which has also manifested itself in the planning and execution of aid, where donors adjust their aid towards reaching certain issues which they have chosen to give specific interest. In the same time it states a clear asymmetric balance in the global discourse. The challenges of embracing elements of political ecology in development ethics, relates to the dangers of expressing *ecological imperialism*; upholding the asymmetrical power balance from the colonial era regarding resource management.

Asymmetry of power is also evident in costs and benefits of forest management, most often "those who convert forest land take the benefit but do not have to pay the cost" (Adams 2009:246). Indigenous groups dependent on the forest for their livelihood can therefore be deprived of forest access and basis for survival. Today most forests are managed by governments, those who don't rely on or relate directly to the forest. According to Siry, 87 % of global forest stocks are now owned by states (Siry et al in Adams 2009:246). The centralization of land rights has highly affected the fate of forest dwellers, since they have lost legal right to their own heritage. Many face the future as environmental and cultural refugees, excluded and deprived of their homelands, left to cope in new areas and correlate accordingly. This can lead to further marginalization and conflicts in addition to environmental degradation.

IV. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VS. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

One of the challenges of adjusting development management to the complex linkages between human capital and the ecosystem relates to the prospects of accumulating economic development while preserving the environment. The question is whether developing economies should first extract their natural resources to grow economically and then later clean up the resulting mess-environmental degradation or alarming conditions of local communities that depended on the natural resources. Scholars hypothesized an Environmental Kuznets curve (EKC) and argue that, although environmental

quality falls as poor countries start to grow economically with effects like deforestation and pollution among several, it rises when they become wealthy (Adams 2009: 333). The case was true for most developed countries in North-west Europe (Mather 1992 in Adams 2009: 249) where forests fell but subsequently rose and the same was reported in developing countries like Vietnam from about 1990 (Kauppi et al 2006 in Adams 2009: 249). The concept of the Kuznets curve can be perceived as the “grow first, clean up later” approach. However, most EKC studies are based on estimations using a number of countries and spanning several decades (Wang 2007: 7) but this might not be valid to all countries. It might take poor countries long to cross from the upward to the downward sloping part of the curve, so the accumulated damage in the meantime may far exceed the present value of higher future growth (Barlett 1997 in Moe 2007: 2). This challenges the sustainability of economic growth thus questioning the possibility of economic growth and environmental sustainability ever being compatible.

V. CONCLUSION

The ideas of development ethics and political ecology have geared in a new explanation and understanding of the relationship between politics, development and poverty. Power relations affect the environment and human development since those with power tend to use the resources for individual benefits without considering collective values. This is fostered by poor governance and the corrupt institutions that exist especially in the developing countries that will need to be dealt with if environment and development issues are to be in harmony. Today, there is consensus among scholars that development ethics should embrace each individual context holistically, acknowledging that “political, economic and social factors affect environmental issues” (Øyhus 2011:1). This means that, human development and environmental issues need to move simultaneously.

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