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Sustain Biodiversity, *Eliminate Rural Poverty*

TEWOLDE BERHAN GEBRE EGZIABHER says that globalisation both deepens poverty and degrades the environment, and calls for it to be reorientated

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals – aimed at improving the life of the poorest and permanently reducing the disadvantage of social groups by ensuring environmental sustainability – will have a greater impact on Africa than anywhere else. For it is now the continent with the highest %age of poor and disadvantaged people.

Most of its poor are rural. They meet their needs by using the renewable natural resources – mostly biological ones – that their immediate environment can provide. Understandably, therefore, their impact on their immediate ecosystems is intense, and their knowledge of them intimate.

Population dynamics

Globalization is increasingly intensifying this impact by perturbing the demands that the rural poor make on their immediate ecosystems. It is doing so by changing population dynamics, by superimposing global demands upon local ones on the

ecosystem, and even by modifying the environmental factors – such as the climate – that had hitherto maintained it. So it is obvious that, if the Goals are to be achieved, biodiversity in the broad sense – i.e. including ecosystems, communities, species, varieties and their subcellular components – must be maintained and sustainably and justly used.

Abject poverty is unbearable whether in an urban or a rural setting: so the rural poor should not attract greater attention simply because of where they live. However, their meagre incomes are subject to greater unpredictability than those of their urban counterparts. They all live off what their immediate ecosystem produces. Most cultivate crops, with or without rearing animals, though some are entirely pastoralists. Their produce is subject to seasonal, annual and periodic vagaries of the weather, pests and diseases. On the whole, they cannot even store food produced in good years for use in bad ones: they are technologically handicapped. Nor can they transport food from areas of

surplus production to those scarcity: they are infrastructurally handicapped. Nor yet can they buy agricultural produce from the market when their own agriculture fails them: they are financially handicapped. Therefore, they are not as well off as their average annual production would suggest – but, rather, as poor as their lowest annual production dictates.

Norms of globalization

Their urban based governments are usually of little help in removing these handicaps. They are usually run by the urban elite, who have little understanding of their problems and merely mimic urban-centred Western governance systems which they studied at school, and which are now lauded and promoted by the international laws and norms of globalization, with its intrinsic individualistic Western values. Any initiative that the rural poor could take, organized as local communities, to overcome their weaknesses as individuals and mobilize initiative is thus undermined: they remain reduced to insignificance even though they constitute the overwhelming majority in their countries. Consequently, they are forced individually to try to satisfy their needs at the expense of the ecosystem's future ability to meet them. Virtually all the rural poor realize the deterioration they are causing to the ecosystem, but they have no option but to continue.

Devegetation results because wood is burnt for fuel or used to meet other needs▶

– such as house construction, furniture, fencing – while grass is overgrazed by domestic animals. Farms lose their fertility with the harvested crops because they are not compensated through manuring, fallowing or even crop rotation. Biodiversity is decimated. Thus land degrades. Soil is eroded by water and wind. The hydrological cycle is disrupted. Floods after rains, and desiccation in the dry season, become common. Desertification sets in. The whole process is accelerated by climate change, which is, itself, exacerbated by the process of land degradation.

When all this inevitably causes famines to strike the rural poor, the urban-centred, wealthy part of the world usually pours out money and grain to help save lives. Some lives are indeed saved. But the relief does not go further, to help reverse the process that impoverishes the victims in the first place. That would take commitment over an extended period to solve the root causes of technological, infrastructural and governance handicaps. So the crises of famines and continuing biodiversity loss keep recurring at ever shorter intervals, breeding dependency among the rural poor rather than helping them help themselves.

Traditional knowledge

In spite of their worsening condition, they continue to be prey to the globalising individualistic urban rich, who prescribe "Free Trade" as a panacea for all ills. Trade indeed improves life when there is enough production to trade with - and when it is among equals and thus genuinely free. Instead, the disabled agricultural system of the rural poor is pitted in against the industrialized world's highly subsidized agriculture. That is why the Agreement on Agriculture of the World Trade Organization (WTO) is now so contentious – and why the United Kingdom's call to dismantle the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy is timely.

Even discontinuing agricultural subsidies, though good, would not suffice. The WTO's Agreement on Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) is being used to rob the biodiversity and traditional knowledge of the impoverishing communities of the poor rural world. Though these are the

communities' own innovations, they are being patented or protected by breeders' rights by rich companies. Genetic engineering of crops has made these patents contagious, so that farmers cannot opt to continue planting their own seed. Cross-pollination introduces patented genes from fields of genetically engineered crops to those planted with conventional ones. Article 34 of TRIPs then turns the farmers, whose crops have been thus contaminated, into infringers, who must pay royalties to the patent owners. Global partnership is thus poised to turn the rural poor into new serfs through the genes that were taken from them in the first place.

Negotiated system

It would, however, be possible to turn globalization into a freeing force for the rural poor, but this would require a genuine global re-orientation. Article 8 (j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) could be used to start a new global process of letting them benefit from their innovations as indigenous and local communities. It would require further developments in international law to recognize their rights: the African Model Law on the Rights of Local Communities, Farmers and Breeders and on Access to Biological Resources is an example of

how it could be done.

The ongoing negotiations on access and benefit-sharing could also be made to help, but only if the negotiated system does not entrench the patenting of life by making it a trigger for sharing benefits.

Genuine participation

These developments will, of course, have to be complemented – in fact preceded – by others in the rural poor's countries. Good governance – which is sensitive to the needs of the poor, works to promote their interests, and fosters their genuine participation in their own administration and ecosystem management – has to become the norm. This can only happen when it is allowed not just by the states of the rural poor, but by those of the urban rich as well.

Since the rural poor are the most embedded of humanity in local ecosystems, and since they thus know and feel them the best, their consequent emancipation would reverse the land degradation syndrome and save biodiversity and the biosphere. Humanity has no choice but to do this. Otherwise, the urban rich will themselves degrade like the land – and perhaps erode away like the soil ■

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