

CLEANING UP POVERTY

In 1972, the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi shocked the world by announcing

'Poverty is the greatest polluter of all'.

The proof, then as now, is on the streets of Mumbai.

For the city's 7 million slum dwellers, poverty, disease and pollution go hand in hand. People who cannot afford garbage collection dump rotting trash in the streets, and those without sanitation deposit human waste in public places. Untreated sewage flows into local creeks and coastal waters, and mosquitoes and flies spread a host of illnesses throughout the densely populated shanty towns.

Thirty per cent of the world's poor live in urban centres, while the remaining 70 per cent - over one third of the world's population - live in marginal, ecologically fragile countryside across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Though specific challenges may vary, poverty exacts high human and environmental costs from both.

Most of the rural poor depend directly on limited natural resources. Desperation drives them to take what they can from the land and water, often depleting the very resources they need to survive. But they have little choice.

Special species

Madagascar is home to 150,000 plant and animal species that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Unique birds, lemurs and chameleons

inhabit the island - along with its 16 million citizens, 12.8 million of whom live on less than \$2 per day. Most of the people rely on slash-and-burn methods to clear land for cash crops like rice, vanilla, coffee and sugar cane. Eighty per cent of the country's rainforests have already been destroyed.

Madagascar's government has pledged to triple the size of its national wildlife reserves from 1.7 million to 6 million hectares by the end of 2008. This seems devastating for poor people who depend on the forests for their livelihood. They recognize the long-term benefits heralded by conservationists: forests prevent soil erosion and help the land retain water and nutrients. Yet restrictions on cutting trees for

firewood and burning forestland for crop cultivation leave them with few options.

Win-win solutions

Governments and citizens are increasingly solving such dilemmas by realizing that poverty alleviation can also tackle environmental degradation. Giving the poor recourse to employment, education and essential services allows them to support themselves without straining the natural environment.

Providing access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation can curb the spread of diseases like diarrhoea, cholera and malaria, and thus enable people to live more active, productive lives. In Mumbai, a volunteer association called the Community of Resource





photo: S. Dolme/UNEP/Topham



SUNNIER PROSPECTS

Brilliant sunshine drenches the dry flatlands of Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula for most of the year. It is a mixed blessing for the region's women, who must endure the steaming tropical heat to gather firewood, fetch water and prepare food over hot flames.

But now they have started to harness the power of the sun through small solar cookers. The low, steady heat produces no fumes and even cooks food unattended throughout the day. Even better, the women are

freed from the thick, toxic smoke that causes so much disease and death, and enabled to lead more productive lives.

'Look at me. I'm 60 and it's as if I were 15. Not even a cough,' smiles Bertila Romero. 'I used to spend all my time at home. Now I can do other things. It's been a total change in my life.'



photo: P. Dominguez/UNEP/Topham



photo: ClearDome Solar Thermal



REWARDING STUDY

In the small town of Cidade Ocidental, Brazil, nine-year-old Geislane Jose da Silva is helping to support her family – by turning up to class each day. She says, 'I help my mother a lot because I go to school. Now we can pay the electricity bills and buy books, pens and even toys and sandals.'

The programme has enjoyed great success in Brazil, and similar schemes have sprung up across Latin America in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Nicaragua. There are also pilot projects across the Atlantic Ocean in Mozambique and Tanzania.

Geislane is one of 8.7 million Brazilian children enrolled in the Government's national Bolsa Escola programme, which pays poor households to keep their children in school. Launched in 2001, Bolsa Escola combats child labour and reduces absenteeism and drop-out rates by granting poor families a monthly sum of 45 reais (\$5) for each child who attends class regularly. The regular income allows them to survive financially without sending their kids out to work.



photo: R. Jones/UNEP/Topham

Organisations (CORO) has combined literacy campaigns with a pay-for-use lavatory scheme: it employs local youth for maintenance and educates the shanty town community about cleanliness and sanitation through simple reading material.

Keeping it green

In Madagascar, meanwhile, interested farmers receive training in low-cost, environmentally friendly techniques to maximize crop yields, and conservation groups are handing out energy-efficient stoves to reduce dependence on firewood. Jobs have opened up, including as nature guides for the island's growing ecotourism. Steady incomes have brought a new appreciation for the nation's biodiversity; at last the poor can see that they too have a vested interest in keeping Madagascar green.