

# Eco-Justice

## Workshop 7

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## Definition of terms and concepts

### Multiple definitions of 'environmental problems'

- *Nature conservation* (endangered species, national parks). This is a very middle class view, and was supported by Apartheid government.
- *Impact of environment on human life* (need for clean air, water, sanitation). This is particularly relevant to the poor, especially people in townships.
- *Global environmental issues* (ozone layer, toxic waste, rainforests, nuclear/biological warfare) are very important to some, while very distant to others, depending particularly on geographical context.
- *Safety of the work environment*. In the 'first world', however, this can even have a negative environmental impact because of waste; discarding things for 'safety' reasons when they could still be used a long time elsewhere.
- *The population crisis facing the environment*, which particularly faces so-called 'third world' countries. In Ethiopia, for instance, the population boom has greatly affected the availability of natural resources for food, fuel, etc. Population concerns inevitably must deal with issues of women's health in general; they have a cause/effect relationship.
- Government, in particular, emphasises the need for *management of resources and the impact of humans on the natural environment*.

### A question of focus

In very poor countries, there is not the luxury of dealing with many environmental issues; the focus is on achieving social and economic justice. People do not know (or do not care?) about preserving the environment in contexts of great poverty or political oppression. Nevertheless, few would argue that any of these concerns are irrelevant; people argue about question of priority, not question of relevance.

- A focus on overpopulation reflects the bias of the affluent. A focus on industrialisation/ consumption reflects the bias of the deprived, putting the onus for environmental crisis on the affluent themselves. /end p. 131/
- The focus should be on the grass-roots communities, because the rich are capable of manipulating the larger processes to their own benefit. There can be a two-pronged approach, empowering the powerless *and* curbing rampant, unequal consumption.
- Ethical focus: If it is a question of choice it must be a choice in favour of the poor and disadvantaged. In South Africa, environmental justice issues are the legacy of the past.

### Integration of environmental and justice issues

The suffering of the poor is an environmental problem, which requires environmental justice. It is not true that environmental issues are a luxury; eco-justice means ecological and economic justice.

However, during South Africa's liberation struggle, there was little or no consideration of environmental issues, because the focus was defined in a specific way—political liberation. In practice and in theory there is a tension. Nevertheless, issues of environment cannot be separated from concerns about social and economic justice. Use of the environment is a critical issue in discussions of so-called 'third world' development.

### Empowering the powerless

People who are well-educated have formulated theories, but these often do not help because there is little knowledge or empathy with the local context. Theory must address reality.

There should be a shift to 'regard the disregarded' as human. There is a need to create mechanisms to give grassroots people a voice to describe their own situation. Government and environmental organisations need to work within the frame of responding to real needs rather than perceived ones.

### **Problem of consumption and its inequalities**

So called 'first world' countries, especially small ones, tend to focus on global issues because they have the luxury of being developed but are concerned with future survival (limited resources, environmental catastrophes).

- Religious communities need to start preaching and doing educational work on these issues; connecting the spiritual and the material/social, both in local congregations and theological education. Faith communities must be self-critical as well, measuring praxis against theology and vice versa. Faith communities must model environmental justice.
- In other areas of the world, multi-faith co-operation on these issues has proven the most effective, because the different traditions prevent one another from over-simplification of issues and theological fatalism.
- Again, there is a great need for religious leaders to listen to their people. Leaders must believe in the ability of their followers to be co-creators with God.
- Faith communities must be political; faith always has political implications, especially on justice issues. 'Political' means social prophecy, however, not partisan alignment. /end p. 132/

### **Success stories of eco-justice initiatives (practical steps)**

- Often people can be mobilised around an event much more effectively than simply an idea; teachable moments should be seized on which can build solidarity through resistance.
- In Zaire, failure was instructive. Different NGO's would come in with lots of technology and money, achieving short-term success, but their efforts would dry up as soon as they left. People must be allowed to define their own needs and take ownership of solutions.
- A township beautification project began with an NGO but kick-started a response from the local government. Efforts were focussed around a yearly celebration of beauty. Celebration as sharing goods in a context of scarcity can be a powerful tool. The importance of co-operation with the local government should be noted.
- Worship and study of religious books (Bible, Koran) can re-vitalise the community and promote mutual support in the process. Religious communities also have responsibility for prophetic witness beyond their own walls. One way is to take affluent people out of their home context and expose them to poverty to promote transformation.
- Participative democracy, where everyone can take part in discussion and decision-making, helps to create an atmosphere of ownership in a community. Since mere talking can lead to inaction and even hopelessness, education is important to effect empowerment. Initiators must come from a stance of personal commitment.
- A prayerful approach of spiritual discernment helps faith communities avoid the impositional approach and respect the ownership of the poor. There is a need for well-integrated spiritual resources to try and change people's whole life outlook and orientation. These goals are best served through the meditation of the individual and the community gathered around the holy text as a rallying point. Prayer and work must be unified.
- 'Hope in the next world' can actually be an important corrective to religious communities' indifference and otherworldliness. The Christian affirmation of this life and the next allows us to view this life in its broader context, thus understanding it more fully and enabling a more profound engagement with it. /end p. 133/