

Health Action Information Network

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Health Action Information Network
(HAIN)

serves the research, information and education needs of the Philippines and international agencies working in health and development.

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What Price Development?

The Industrial Revolution was the main engine that brought unprecedented economic wealth to the global community in a relatively short period. Such wealth, however, came with a steep cost: environmental degradation.

The revolution was aided, to a large extent, by the abundance of natural resources available back then. Industrialists wasted no time in plumbing the deep earth for oil to fuel its machineries. Trees were felled down and mountains were blasted to extract precious metals and minerals hidden in its bowel. As mankind marched towards a progressive civilization, it left in its wake a plundered environment.

Pollution

Water and air pollution have grave health consequences, such as high incidences of cholera and respiratory diseases. Developed countries have been quick to address the persistent problem of pollution by imposing stringent measures.

In contrast, least developed and developing countries continue to reel from the health costs of pollution. In the "World's Worst Polluted Places," released by Blacksmith Institute, poor countries dominate the list; two cities/provinces each in India (Sukinda and Vapi) and China (Linfen and Tianying) made it to the top ten. The cities/provinces are either located in mining areas or industrial estates. Because of the extractive nature of these industries, water, soil, and air in the mentioned regions are severely contaminated with toxic chemicals. In Tianying, lead in soil and air is ten times the national average, while in Vapi, its groundwater is contaminated with mercury.

In these areas, researchers found that there are higher incidences of cancer, skin and respiratory diseases, and birth defects.

Denuded forests

Data from the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) show that 13 million hectares of forests are lost every year due to deforestation. Although the rate of forest loss is going downward, the slow progress is still not enough to cover what has already been lost. According to FAO, for the 2000 – 2005 period, 37 countries lost at least one percent of their forest cover every year. In contrast, only 20 countries managed to expand their forest covers by at least one percent.

Deforestation skews ecological equilibrium, often with disastrous consequences. Forests are home to a variety of species, all of which rely on each other for survival. The loss of a specie's habitat could spell extinction for that particular specie, which could trigger a domino effect in the food chain.

With a diminishing forest cover, a community is more prone to flashfloods and landslides since there are no more trees to hold the soil together. The people of Aurora, a Philippine province, know this all too well. When a typhoon hit the province in 2004, it triggered a flashflood – blamed on rampant illegal logging in the province - which claimed the lives of thousands of people. In the aftermath, thousands of illegally cut logs were seen floating – along with the bodies of victims who drown in the flood.

Nature strikes back

As nature struggles to regain its equilibrium, mankind is now facing a new threat: global warming. As the earth's temperature rises, it brings about a myriad of interrelated problems.

With global warming, glaciers and sea ices are melting at a faster rate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that by 2080, sea level could rise by a low of nine centimeters to a high of 69 centimeters.

Island-nations dotting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, as well as coastal communities, are at risk of being totally engulfed by a rising sea level. The World Wildlife Foundation reported that many villagers in Saolufata in Samoa have already moved further inland because of the receding coastline. Tuvalu and Kiribati, on the other hand, face the possibility of a potable water shortage because saltwater has already penetrated some of its groundwater sources.

In a press release, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific warned that the Asia-Pacific region is more

vulnerable to the threat due to the double burden of higher population density and lower natural resource endowment per capita.

“Asia and the Pacific has a population density that is 1.5 times the global average, the lowest freshwater availability per capita of all global regions, a biologically productive area per capita that is less than 60 per cent of the global average and arable and permanent crop land per capita that is less than 80 per cent of the global average,” it says.

Equitable and sustainable use of resources Environmental degradation has political and economic dimensions, and it is not a mere coincidence that poor countries are often the ones bearing the brunt of environmental plunder. Least developed and developing countries are rich in natural resources, but through international trade instrumentalities and government corruptions, these resources are mined and extracted by transnational corporations. The communities affected are left holding an empty bag, as they struggle to deal with the health consequences of environmental degradation.

Equitable use of resources should also be prioritized - along with sustainability - in the development of an earth-friendly agenda. Talks of environmental sustainability would be rendered meaningless unless the issue of equitability is addressed.

Article by Ross Mayor for Health Alert Asia Pacific newsletter, Issue 12, 2008

Sources:

FAO Forest Resources Assessment 2005.

<http://www.fao.org/forestry/28813/en/>

World Wildlife Foundation.

http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/climate_change/problems/impacts/sea_levels/index.cfm

Other useful sources of information:

Blacksmith Institute. www.blacksmithinstitute.org

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. www.ipcc.ch

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. www.unescap.org

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