

Perpetuating the Poverty Myth

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Vandana Shiva - Sachs is wrong when he says: "In a world of plenty, 1 billion people are so poor their lives are in danger." The indigenous people in the Amazon, the mountain communities in the Himalayas, peasants anywhere whose land has not been appropriated and whose water and biodiversity have not been destroyed by debt-creating industrial agriculture are ecologically rich, even though they earn less than a dollar a day.

Two myths that keep the world poor by Vandana Shiva

<http://www.odemagazine.com/article.php?aID=4192>

Global poverty is a hot topic right now. But anyone serious about ending it needs to understand the true causes, argues Indian environmentalist Vandana Shiva. From rock singer Bob Geldof to UK politician Gordon Brown, the world suddenly seems to be full of high-profile people with their own plans to end poverty. Jeffrey Sachs, however, is not a simply a do-gooder but one of the world's leading economists, head of the Earth Institute and in charge of a UN panel set up to promote rapid development. So when he launched his book *The End of Poverty*, people everywhere took notice. Time magazine even made it into a cover story. But, there is a problem with Sachs' how-to-end poverty prescriptions. He simply doesn't understand where poverty comes from. He seems to view it as the original sin. "A few generations ago, almost everybody was poor," he writes, then adding: "The Industrial Revolution led to new riches, but much of the world was left far behind."

This is a totally false history of poverty. The poor are not those who have been "left behind"; they are the ones who have been robbed. The wealth accumulated by Europe and North America are largely based on riches taken from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Without the destruction of India's rich textile industry, without the takeover of the spice trade, without the genocide of the native American tribes, without African slavery, the Industrial Revolution would not have resulted in new riches for Europe or North America. It was this violent takeover of Third World resources and markets that created wealth in the North and poverty in the South.

Two of the great economic myths of our time allow people to deny this intimate link, and spread misconceptions about what poverty is:

First, the destruction of nature and of people's ability to look after themselves are blamed not on industrial growth and economic colonialism, but on poor people themselves. Poverty, it is stated, causes environmental destruction. The disease is then offered as a cure: further economic growth is supposed to solve the very problems of poverty and ecological decline that it gave rise to in the first place. This is the message at the heart of Sachs' analysis.

The second myth is an assumption that if you consume what you produce, you do not really

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produce, at least not economically speaking. If I grow my own food, and do not sell it, then it doesn't contribute to GDP, and therefore does not contribute towards "growth".

People are perceived as "poor" if they eat food they have grown rather than commercially distributed junk foods sold by global agri-business. They are seen as poor if they live in self-built housing made from ecologically well-adapted materials like bamboo and mud rather than in cinder block or cement houses. They are seen as poor if they wear garments manufactured from handmade natural fibres rather than synthetics.

Yet sustenance living, which the wealthy West perceives as poverty, does not necessarily mean a low quality of life. On the contrary, by their very nature economies based on sustenance ensure a high quality of life-when measured in terms of access to good food and water, opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, robust social and cultural identity, and a sense of meaning in people's lives . Because these poor don't share in the perceived benefits of economic growth, however, they are portrayed as those "left behind". This false distinction between the factors that create affluence and those that create poverty is at the core of Sachs' analysis. And because of this, his prescriptions will aggravate and deepen poverty instead of ending it.

Modern concepts of economic development, which Sachs sees as the "cure" for poverty, have been in place for only a tiny portion of human history. For centuries, the principles of sustenance allowed societies all over the planet to survive and even thrive. Limits in nature were respected in these societies and guided the limits of human consumption. When society's relationship with nature is based on sustenance, nature exists as a form of common wealth. It is redefined as a "resource" only when profit becomes the organising principle of society and sets off a financial imperative for the development and destruction of these resources for the market.

However much we choose to forget or deny it, all people in all societies still depend on nature. Without clean water, fertile soils and genetic diversity, human survival is not possible. Today, economic development is destroying these onetime commons, resulting in the creation of a new contradiction: development deprives the very people it professes to help of their traditional land and means of sustenance, forcing them to survive in an increasingly eroded natural world.

A system like the economic growth model we know today creates trillions of dollars of super profits for corporations while condemning billions of people to poverty. Poverty is not, as Sachs suggests, an initial state of human progress from which to escape. It is a final state people fall into when one-sided development destroys the ecological and social systems that have maintained the life, health and sustenance of people and the planet for ages. The reality is that people do not die for lack of income. They die for lack of access to the wealth of the commons.

Here, too, Sachs is wrong when he says: "In a world of plenty, 1 billion people are so poor their lives are in danger." The indigenous people in the Amazon, the mountain communities in the Himalayas, peasants anywhere whose land has not been appropriated and whose water and biodiversity have not been destroyed by debt-creating industrial agriculture are ecologically rich, even though they earn less than a dollar a day.

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On the other hand, people are poor if they have to purchase their basic needs at high prices no matter how much income they make. Take the case of India. Because of cheap food and fibre being dumped by developed nations and lessened trade protections enacted by the government, farm prices in India are tumbling, which means that the country's peasants are losing \$26 billion U.S. each year. Unable to survive under these new economic conditions, many peasants are now poverty-stricken and thousands commit suicide each year.

Elsewhere in the world, drinking water is privatised so that corporations can now profit to the tune of \$1 trillion U.S. a year by selling an essential resource to the poor that was once free. And the \$50 billion U.S. of "aid" trickling North to South is but a tenth of the \$500 billion being sucked in the other direction due to interest payments and other unjust mechanisms in the global economy imposed by the World Bank and the IMF. If we are serious about ending poverty, we have to be serious about ending the systems that create poverty by robbing the poor of their common wealth, livelihoods and incomes. Before we can make poverty history, we need to get the history of poverty right. It's not about how much wealthy nations can give, so much as how much less they can take.

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Dr. Vandana Shiva is a physicist and prominent Indian environmental activist. She founded Navdanya, a movement for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights. She directs the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy. Her most recent books are Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge and Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply.