

EQUITY

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Keywords : Equity, inequity, sustainable development, intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, ecological justice

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Summary

Equity and ecological and social harmony are all necessary for sustainable development to occur. Without equity, the world cannot peacefully resolve the complex ecological and social problems that face it and would be doomed to struggles over increasingly pressed resources, struggles between the haves and have-nots. But with equity, the world can move even beyond the vision outlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

The economic gap between industrialized and less industrialized countries and the affluent and the poor has grown dangerously wide, with many underconsuming and not having access to even the barest minimum needed, while others overconsume destructively. Underconsumption and overconsumption, like violence and environmental degradation, should be seen as indicators of social failure that sustainable development should attempt to correct. Inequity concentrates underconsumption primarily among those oppressed by poverty, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or any other criteria. Simultaneously, most overconsumption is concentrated

among the world's affluent: in the wealthiest countries and regions and among the elites all over the world. Overconsumption and underconsumption are inherently linked in the global capitalist system. In a closed and interdependent system, the overconsumption of the few is only possible by the underconsumption of the many, for if all overconsumed like the rich, the system would quickly exhaust the earth's capacity to sustain life.

To counter these destructive patterns, progress has to be defined in terms of providing a healthy, ecological foundation for everyone rather than in terms of increasing profits for the wealthy. Sustainable development has to implement social changes that help to bridge the growing gap between the affluent and the poor and build a sustainable future for all. Such ecological justice solutions have to involve not just appropriate technology, but social processes that effectively involve people from both the bottom-up and the top-down in developing solutions that benefit them all as well as future generations.

Helpful accounting methods would consider the monetary price of inequity as seen in such things as hunger, malnutrition, high infant mortality, poverty, the high use of prisons, unemployment, inadequate education, or violence. However, monetary accounting alone is inadequate for judging sustainable development. Instead, setting a range of standards for quality of life would be useful, a range of minimum and maximum standards. Minimum standards for the quality of life, including plans to fulfill basic needs or sustainable livelihoods for all, is a foundation on which equity can be built. But building that foundation also requires setting maximum standards, standards that would help in eliminating such things as overconsumption, pollution, excessive accumulation of capital in the hands of a few, and would encourage local production using local resources for local needs.

1. Introduction

Equity and ecological and social harmony are interrelated. They are all necessary for sustainable development, this volume's focus, to occur. Without equity, the world cannot peacefully resolve the complex ecological and social problems that face it and would be doomed to struggles over increasingly pressed resources, struggles between the haves and have-nots. Already the economic gap between industrialized and less industrialized countries and the affluent and the poor has grown dangerously wide, with many not having access to even the barest minimum needed. Equity is an essential ingredient for developing the economic and social foundation that all need while also developing ecological harmony.

2. Equity and Inequity Defined

Equity is that which is fair and just, while inequity is unfairness and injustice. Both equity and inequity are created socially and exist in higher or lower degrees depending on how society is organized. Consequently, equity can be deliberately increased and inequity can be reduced through the promotion of sustainable development. As used in this volume, there are two major principles of equity that are basic to sustainable development: (1) intergenerational equity, and (2) and intragenerational equity.

2.1. Intergenerational Equity

Intergenerational equity means that each generation thinks in terms of future generations' needs and that the present generation acts in ways that do not endanger future generations. This is a principle that asks people to consider the consequences of their individual and group actions in the long term, rather than simply in terms of the present or short term. This requires considering the long-term ecological and social consequences of present patterns, for both unbalanced ecological and social patterns can endanger future generations. For example, pollution not only affects living people, it can affect their descendants, such as by causing genetic defects that are passed on to future generations. Similarly, inadequate wages, food, water, shelter, and health care affect not only the present but future generations, such as seen when malnutrition causes brain damage in developing fetuses, or in growing children. Intergenerational equity requires actions and policies that consider long-term social and ecological consequences of behavior and programs.

2.2. Intragenerational Equity

The principle of intragenerational equity recognizes that all people are related to each other and need to share the planet as a “commons” for the benefit of all. Whether they are in different regions of the world, in different groups within regions, in different social classes or other diverse groups, this principle recognizes that all people are entitled to an adequate share. In promoting sustainable development, intragenerational equity should lead to policies aimed at ensuring that the basic needs of everyone are met, that no one is allowed to fall below the minimum needed for a healthy quality of life. These efforts should include reducing the material and social gaps between the privileged and the oppressed by developing ways to meet both the physiological needs of food, shelter, clothing, and health care and the social needs of respecting and loving individuals. Through a commitment to ending the wasteful and destructive use of the environment and social resources, the principle of intragenerational equity not only promotes respect for the human rights of all, it supports the conservation and development of the creative energies of all.

3. Relations of Inequity: Poverty, Hunger, and Health

Discussions of equity necessarily involve transforming the interconnected relations of inequity dividing people on this planet. These relations of inequity are rooted in the existing social fabric through which people relate to each other. Major relations of inequity today are complexly interwoven economic, power, and other social patterns. Unendurable poverty exists side by side on the planet with the greatest wealth that has ever been accumulated. At the same time, people are being tortured, maimed, killed, persecuted, and otherwise abused in horrendous numbers, while other areas have made great strides in human or civil rights. Hunger itself is an abuse of basic human rights, growing out of these relations of inequity: the unequal economic, power, and other social relations that cut across the globe from North to South, through class, gender, ethnic, and other divisions.

Poverty is a major factor causing hunger and disease, and the United Nations has designated 1997 through 2006 the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, making eradicating poverty “an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind” (General Assembly resolution 51/178, December 1996). Imperative actions targeted by the UN include promoting such things as access to sustainable livelihoods and productive resources, universal access to basic social services, social systems for those who cannot support themselves, empowerment of the poor, addressing the disproportionate impact of poverty on women, and improving international cooperation to eliminate poverty.

The gap between the rich and poor in the world is vast and growing. Some estimates put the percentage of people living in poverty in the world at 20%. That means that one person in five on the planet lives in conditions that cannot adequately sustain them. Over 1 billion people (out of a total of approximately 6 billion) do not receive adequate resources for a healthy life. Many more people are struggling to overcome tremendous obstacles simply to feed themselves and their children, while others have much more than they need. For example, the 100 richest people in the world are estimated to have as much wealth as the 1.5 billion poorest people.

As Figure 1 shows, the poorest half of the world had less than 15% of the global gross domestic product (GDP), while the 15% of the population with the highest incomes had more than 50% of the global GDP.

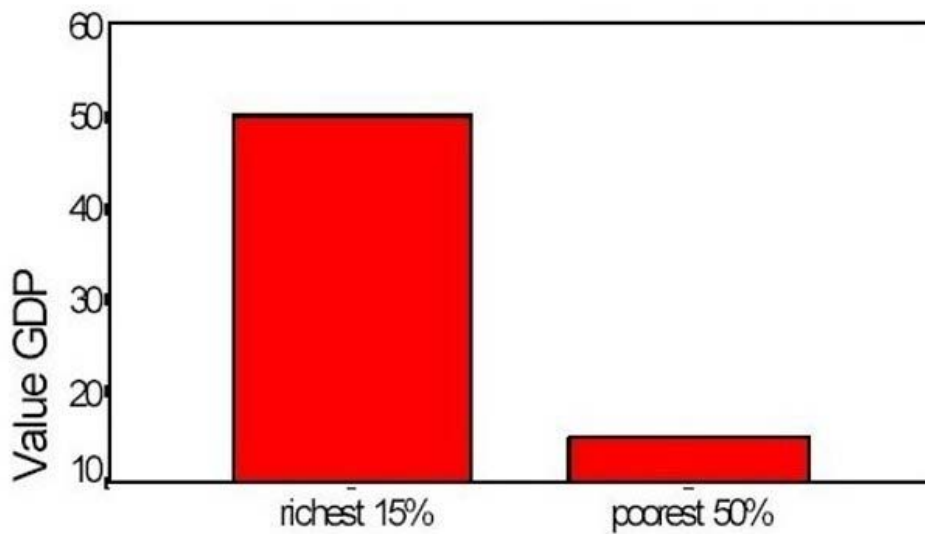


Figure 1. Distribution of global gross domestic product. (Source: *World Resources: A Guide to the Global Environment, The Urban Environment, 1996–1997*. New York: World Resources Institute, The United Nations Environment Program, The United Nations Development Program, The World Bank, 1996: 161.)

Particularly worrisome is the fact that the per capita income gap between the rich and poor countries keeps widening. This growing gap is most intense for some of the poorest countries. For example, even though Bangladesh’s per capita GDP (purchasing power parity (PPP), measured in constant 1987 international dollars) grew from US\$544 to US\$767 between 1980 and 1996, the gap between Bangladesh and the United States

grew from US\$17 199 in 1980 to US\$20 436 in 1996. Burundi's per capita GDP actually declined in that period (from US\$591 to US\$448), so that country had no hope of reducing the growing inequity.

The severe problem of hunger and poverty in northeastern Brazil illustrates patterns that are happening around the world. While Brazil is one of the top economies in the world with a large number of people who are very wealthy, 40% of its population lives in poverty and its infant mortality is among the highest in Latin America, with the northeast and some other regions having rates as high as some of the poorest countries in Africa. Brazil used the approach of the industrial countries of England, France, and the US, building industries and cash crops for export to create jobs and hoping the benefits would "trickle down" to the bottom. But that has not happened. Communal land was expropriated or privatized, and large numbers of peasants became deprived of land that they had used for subsistence, had to work for wages that are inadequate to buy food, while structural adjustment policies demanded by international lending agencies resulted in the reduction of social support programs that had acted as a buffer for the poor.

The northeastern region has been dependent on sugar as the focus of the economy for more than four hundred years, with class relations between a plantation-owning elite and a large population of peasant wage earners that cut sugarcane for a living established in the Portuguese colonial period. In that period, imported slaves (ancestors of many of the contemporary workers) were brought in to grow and process sugarcane. In the 1950s and 1960s, government policies that encouraged technological changes and increased sugar production for export resulted in the eviction of peasants from their lands and the flight to the cities in search of jobs. Poverty was extensive, and even those with jobs did not make enough to support their families adequately. For example, in 1989, the legal minimum monthly income was US\$40, while food alone for a family of four cost four times that much. In the mid-1980s, Brazil and other countries, heavily in debt to the World Bank and other Western financial institutions for loans to industrialize, were forced to renegotiate their loans to avoid default and to reduce government spending, including on public welfare, housing, education, and health. This put even more pressure on the poorest people.

While the patterns of poverty are most acute in poorer countries, hunger is a problem even in the wealthiest countries, for there is no solid foundation that ensures that adequate food and other necessities are available to everyone, even the employed. It costs much more to live in the wealthier countries, but millions of their people are paid lower wages than those needed to support a minimally decent standard of living for households with children. For example, one charity (Second Harvest) estimated that in 1997 in the United States 40% of the households seeking food aid had at least one person who was employed. The minimum wage of US\$5.50 an hour in the US may seem high by the standards of developing countries, but it is not enough for many to pay for both food and shelter in cities like New York and Los Angeles, and the employed make up a part of the population who lives in homeless shelters in those cities.

In wealthy countries, poverty is not determined simply by material wealth, but how the poor do relative to the rest of the society. How wealth is distributed among groups is

indicative of their health status. People in wealthy countries with the smallest proportion of the population in relative poverty, with the smallest range of incomes, have better health than do people in wealthy countries with more inequity. For example, the United States and Japan had similar income distributions and life expectancy in 1970, but today, Japan has the highest life expectancy in the world (80 years) as well as the most egalitarian income distribution, while income inequity has grown in the US, and the US ranks 13th in life expectancy.

In a world dependent on having money, hunger is primarily caused by poverty and the inability to buy food. Hunger and malnutrition are major factors in disease and death. While famine as a cause of hunger has decreased, the aching, endemic continual hunger caused by poverty has increased. For example, although post-colonial India has been highly successful in preventing famines in its fifty years of independence, it still has endemic hunger, but those continuing Indian deaths do not receive the attention that is given to famine.

The increasing endemic hunger caused by poverty continues to be largely ignored by the press and public, and sometimes even denied by state agencies and the hungry themselves. Why is this endemic hunger ignored or denied, or so often perceived as a medical problem rather than a problem of poverty? Governments often refuse to acknowledge hunger because it is an admission that they have failed to provide adequately for their people, but even the hungry learn to misidentify hunger as having medical or other causes, as anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes' work in Brazil illustrates. Some of the difficulty in adequately perceiving causes of hunger and other social patterns of inequity grows out of the kinds of theories that are used to explain inequity.

4. Theories about Inequity

While many diverse theories have been used to explain the causes of inequity and of the growing economic gap between industrialized and less industrialized countries and between the rich and poor in the world, for the purposes of this volume, theories can be divided into three types (1) top-down theories, (2) bottom-up theories, and (3) ecological justice theories. These theories cut across many academic disciplines and have been used to look at patterns in diverse groups and geographical regions. While theories are used to make sense out of reality, they are also used to maintain or transform social systems. Consequently, theories always reflect the social positions and intentions of those using them, and can be used either to perpetuate inequity or to reduce and eliminate it.

4.1. Top-down Theories

Top-down kinds of theories reflect the perspective of the affluent in the world, the elites, whether inside countries or between them, and support the maintenance of their positions. Top-down theories assume that the status quo is the “normal” pattern and that any problems with it, such as inequity, are inevitable, the fault of those who are at the bottom, or will automatically be corrected as the world “modernizes,” industrializes, or “develops.” This kind of perspective has been used by the privileged in the world to

rationalize and justify their own positions and has taken many ingenious cultural forms, sometimes expressed in sexist, racist, ethnocentric, and elaborate social class or caste patterns that have been rationalized within educational, religious, family, economic, and other institutions, including scholarly arenas.

The top-down approach has been particularly influential in wealthy Western countries in the North. The work of Simon Kuznets illustrates this kind of scholarly perspective in Western economics which projects that the gap between rich and poor will disappear over time. Kuznets sees domestic income inequality as a by-product of development, but suggests that the gap reduces as industrialization occurs. Similarly, some scholars, such as Marion J. Levy, Jr., focusing on the process of “modernization” suggest that the gap will be narrowed when modern values and institutions are adopted. That kind of approach implies that the gap between rich and poor is basically a cultural problem in which the cultural values (and institutions) of industrialization are lacking in poorer countries and is an approach strongly critiqued by many from the South, such as Walter Rodney, discussed in the Section 4.2.

Under a top-down perspective, high population growth is usually seen as a major factor in unsustainable development, for it is assumed to hamper economic growth and be responsible for poverty, hunger, environmental devastation, and political instability. The two major top-down theories to explain population growth are the neo-Malthusian position and the theory of the demographic transition. Both models are ethnocentric in their assumptions that those in poorer countries are “overpopulating,” and being less rational and modern than those in richer countries. Transition theorists particularly tend to ignore the way human populations all through history have adjusted their fertility in response to their own economic and social environments and act as if reduced fertility is unique to industrialization.

Some top-down theories are rooted in a biological determinism which incorrectly assumes an inevitability to human “nature” that it does not have, such as assuming that men inherently are programmed to dominate women. Much capitalist economic analysis (like Walter Rostow’s influential stages of economic development theory) similarly assumes that there is an inherently competitive, even domineering nature to humans that is not supported by studies in diverse kinds of cultures. Numerous social science studies suggest that human interaction might more easily be understood to be based on the need to cooperate, the need to use culture or social patterns to survive. Even inside the competition of capitalism, people cooperate to make society work, and all human societies depend on such social cooperation.

4.2. Bottom-up Theories

Bottom-up theories consider the perspective of the most disenfranchised and suggest that objective, material circumstances (such as economic opportunities or political power) within and between groups keep them from achieving equity. Dependency theorists, often using Immanuel Wallerstein’s influential “world system” model or the work of Andre Gunner Frank, argue that the development of poor countries is retarded and dependent because their economies have been shaped since the colonial period of the sixteenth century to benefit the countries who are now industrialized. Wallerstein

argues that inequality is a product of the basic forces driving the capitalist world economy and the end of inequality is tied to the end of capitalism.

Similarly, the work of Indian economist Amartya Sen, recently recognized with the Nobel Prize, uses a bottom-up approach. Sen consistently demonstrates how inequity, in whatever form it shows itself, costs more than is typically calculated with a simple economic approach and consequently has to be corrected using more comprehensive approaches. Unemployment, for example, can have a chain reaction of consequences that include increasing racial, national, and gender inequities, family breakdown, psychological harm, and loss of political leverage. Unlike many other bottom-up theorists, Sen finds some commonality in processes producing inequity in both wealthy groups and areas as well as among the poor. His work on famine suggests that its causes are rooted in economic, social, and power processes that do not provide adequate distribution to all who need it, particularly the poor. At the same time, Sen recognizes that high income alone does not guarantee the absence of inequity. It is possible to be wealthy, for example, and still to be socially stigmatized, such as for being physically or mentally handicapped, or to be wealthy and still not be able to participate politically. Thus, Sen suggests that wealth alone does not eliminate inequity.

Guyanese historian and political activist Walter Rodney, who was politically assassinated in 1980, provides another example of an influential bottom-up approach. His death illustrates how much has often been at stake in the struggle to reduce inequity in the world. Rodney put responsibility for Africa's underdevelopment on the European colonial systems that drained African wealth to build European affluence. Rodney saw this process as part of the global capitalist system in which even affluent countries without African colonies, such as the US, and their workers, benefited from the underdevelopment of Africa. That kind of bottom-up perspective implies that the poor are not the cause of their poverty. Instead, that poverty is a consequence of a broad social system of inequity.

Feminist analysis is another bottom-up perspective that is strongly interdisciplinary. Feminism makes the issue of gender central, suggesting that while women may have been ignored or devalued in social institutions (including academic texts), they nevertheless have always been central in human societies and consideration of the role of gender should be at the core of all disciplines. Feminism suggests that gender equity is the ultimate goal, and when this happens, feminism as a separate perspective will no longer be needed and will disappear. As a part of this theoretical integration, much recent feminist analyses, such as discussed by Henrietta Moore in anthropology, have recognized that all issues of equity have to be central to consideration and have integrated race, class, ethnicity, and gender in their works.

By outlining how significant the control of wealth and power is in mass societies, bottom-up theories help identify processes that disenfranchise people and help in mobilizing them for change. Far from monolithic, these bottom-up theories have included such diverse forms as the communal egalitarianism rooted in indigenous classless societies in Africa and other continents, the democratic socialism of Western European countries like Denmark or Finland, varieties of Islamic "socialism," Christian

or other religious “communalism,” as well as the communist parties of the former Soviet bloc of countries and China.

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Biographical Sketch

Catherine Hodge McCoid is professor of anthropology at the Department of History and Anthropology, Central Missouri State University, USA. She holds a Ph.D and a MA in anthropology from the University of Missouri, Columbia. She is the coordinator of Consultant^N's Network for the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology and Society for Applied Anthropology. She has been analyzing data in a cross-national survey of over 100 countries of relationships between population patterns, violence, health, other variables, and social change. It involves data from the 1940s through the present as well as historical case studies. A number of papers and other publications have come from it. In addition, she has written a number of articles on public policy, health, and gender issues including such topics as breast cancer policy in the United States, the Feminism of Eleanor Burke Leacock, and dowry deaths in India.

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