

From Knowledge to Action: International Human Rights and the Study of *Our* Environment

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Humans vs. Nature: *Our* Environment

“The environment” often brings to mind pristine mountain streams, lush tropical rainforests, or frolicking penguins in the arctic. Seldom does one envision schoolchildren suffering from asthma in the South Bronx, communities recovering from flooding in Bangladesh, or women traveling far distances down dark roads for firewood in Kenya. Unfortunately, “the environment” is too often relegated to people-free, postcard images, rather than as the systems, resources, and life upon which we depend daily. As it is impossible to ignore human impacts on “the environment,” it is also impossible to ignore environmental impacts on every aspect of human life.

The Declaration on Human Rights establishes that “*everyone has a right to life, liberty and personal security.*”¹ Environmental variability and degradation affect all sectors of life and their most dramatic impact is the increase in vulnerability of the world’s poorest populations. Fundamentally, life on earth requires water, air, food, and shelter. If we think of these necessities for life in terms of human rights, can one achieve “life, liberty and personal security” without access to potable water, clean air, food security, and adequate shelter? Therefore, are they not basic human rights? There is no question that environmental stewardship is ethically, if not innately, linked to “life, liberty and personal security.” Human rights and the environment are codependent; without access to a healthy environment, human rights are inaccessible.

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights www.un.org/Overview/rights.html Sourced: June 14, 2008

The Responsibility of Knowledge

Environmental Studies searches to understand the never-ending complexities of our environment. One might focus on core issues such as natural resource management, climate change, or biodiversity, but these are all directly linked to poverty, health, equity, migration, conflict, and education. Specifically, every component of human rights depends on our environment and is threatened by global environmental variability and degradation.

In today's world of globalization and technology, we have knowledge of, if not direct links to, communities around the world. According to philosopher Kwame Appiah, "*Each person you know about and affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality.*" Accordingly, we have knowledge that our actions directly impact the health of our local—and global—environment, thereby threatening the human rights of many throughout the world.² As our knowledge continues to grow, so do our responsibilities.

Risk in an Inequitable World

The risks affiliated with environmental degradation are a shared reality: We are all at risk due to the impacts variability and degradation of our environment cause. Whether it be in the form of climate change, heavy metals in fish, dwindling forest reserves, feces-laden water, or failing crops, environmental variability and degradation result in global increases of forced migration, inequitable resource allocation, disease, and death.

The level of vulnerability we each face varies with our ability to adapt to these risks. For those of us with personal or community-based financial resources, support systems, and well-established infrastructure, we are at less risk for compromising our human rights to "liberty and personal security" when faced with environmental challenges.

² Human Development Report 2007/2008 "Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world" <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/> Sourced: June 14, 2008

According to the Human Development Report, vulnerability “*describes an inability to manage risk without being forced to make choices that compromise human well-being.*” In 2006, more than one billion people were living in conditions of extreme poverty (less than U.S.\$1 a day), with 2.7 billion living with less than \$2 a day.³ However, poverty reaches far beyond income generation; it transcends access to natural resources such as water, food and fuel, access to and quality of education, and the ability to live free from disease—particularly those diseases for which cures exist. According to the UN Millennium Project, “*every year eleven million children die—most under the age of five and more than six million from completely preventable causes like malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia.*”⁴ Accordingly, in vulnerable communities, environmental degradation and variability result in lower school enrollment—particularly for girls—increased levels of malnutrition, a higher propensity for natural resource-related conflicts, and much more.

Current global energy demands, rapid land-use change, over-consumption, and the burning of fossil fuels continue to increase the vulnerabilities of communities throughout the world. If left unchecked, our daily choices reinforce global inequities and obstruct human rights.

From Knowledge to Action

Developed countries have had decades to exploit natural resources with minimal accountability. As a result, we are forcing the world’s poor to disproportionately suffer under the consequences. Allowing already vulnerable populations to deal with the impacts of environmental degradation—of which they have had minimal contribution to this point—only exacerbates inequity and injustice.⁵ It is important for us all to consider the following: inaction is a form of action. This is particularly true in the case of the impacts of our environment on human rights. Our

³ 2006 Facts on Poverty from the Millennium Project, www.unmillenniumproject.org/resources/fastfacts_e.htm Sourced: June 14, 2008

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Human Development Report 2007/2008 “Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world” <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/> Sourced: June 14, 2008

actions and inactions today will greatly impact human development in the years to come: we have technology; we have financial resources; however, we lack sufficient collective action.⁶

One of the goals of higher education is to create spaces for learning, dialogue, and action. Learning more about the earth's systems, and our involvement in them, is a first step. It is up to students and faculty alike to overcome apathy and to challenge us all to acknowledge our privileges, opportunities, and responsibilities. Can we reduce waste and over-consumption by honestly determining our "needs" vs. "wants"? Before we act, do we take into account the impact we have on our environment and others? Are we willing to apply our knowledge to make a difference?

These questions are critical in ensuring international human rights across cultures for current and future generations. As declared in the Human Development Report, we are *all* facing an ethical challenge: "*Just as we do not discount the human rights of future generations because they are equivalent to ours, so we should accept a 'stewardship of the earth' responsibility to accord future generations the same ethical weight as the current generation.*"⁷

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid