

A Contribution to Sida's Poverty Study

# Poverty and the Environment

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**Sida**

SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
COOPERATION AGENCY

Department for Natural Resources and the Environment



## Poverty and the environment

### Foreword

Both the environmental and poverty problems at present threatening the world are many-faceted in their separate forms. When they are to be discussed together, simplifications become unavoidable, especially when using an aggregated level. Local and individual perspectives must always be considered when the connection between poverty and environmental degradation is analysed in practice.

It is not less important to attempt to summarise the cause and effect relationship which exists between these two phenomena, and the problems associated with it, as there is a tendency to underestimate the difficulties created by environmental degradation for the long term struggle against poverty. This has led to the retained belief in the myth that economic growth, irrespective of its basis, will simultaneously solve both environmental and poverty-related problems. This is a dangerous assumption and - as so often in the past - the poorest people in the world will pay an unreasonably high price if this oversimplified and obsolete view continues to prevail.

The following are some summarised thoughts on the particularly complex area of environment and poverty, views which are partially based on a study carried out by SIDA as preparation for UNCED. Sture Persson, Ministry of the Environment has participated in the work on this summary which has been written as a contribution to SIDA's overall study on the struggle against poverty in Swedish development assistance.

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## POVERTY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The newest threats to our common security are primarily connected to the problems of poverty, continued rapid population growth, the scarcity of certain natural resources and the degradation of the natural environment.

Humankind is faced with a situation in which the environment and its life sustaining systems are being increasingly exposed to strong negative effects. There is a risk that poverty will be made permanent in increasingly greater areas while the gap between rich and poor widens, which contributes to the degradation of natural resources and the environment.

In virtually all countries, poorer groups are most seriously affected by environmental degradation - by both local and global environmental changes. However, poverty is also a root cause of environmental destruction.

### ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION INCREASES POVERTY

#### **Human beings' basic needs**

In many of the poorer areas, the limit concerning utilisation of water for agricultural production etc is rapidly being approached. Access to arable land is decreasing. Approximately 60% of all rural households in developing countries are considered to have too little arable, fertile land to support themselves at a reasonable level, approximately 13% of households have no land at all.

Approximately 1,400 million hectares of the global total of 1,800 million hectares of grazing and dry forests are exposed to environmental degradation. About 17 million hectares, or 1%, of tropical rain forests disappear annually which causes extreme difficulties for the local poor.

Between one and two thousand million people, of which a large proportion are poor, obtain their primary protein from coastal waters. However coastal marine environments, and with them marine production, are severely threatened in many parts of the world. The poorest groups are generally those who are most dependent on a functioning marine environment, as fish and other marine organisms are often their only affordable high quality protein source.

In areas where poverty remains or even increases in spite of generally satisfactory economic development (India, several Latin American countries etc), stresses on the ecological system are increasing.

Environmental degradation is expressed in decreased yield from soil and water resources. Erosion, deforestation, overgrazing, marine environmental degradation, loss of bio-diversity, pollution of soil, water, air etc are all examples of problems which limit the production potential of the natural resources on which poorer groups are often directly dependent. Women and children from poorer groups are often affected most negatively. Women produce 75% of all foodstuffs in Africa and contribute 90% of the necessary time for food preparation. When fertility declines due to soil erosion or the availability of fuel wood and other forest products decreases as a result of deforestation, women are the primary victims, and through them, children.

At present there are many poor people dependent on bio-mass for energy supply, even in urban areas. The design of energy systems in the future, based on environmental requirements, will be decisive for many poorer groups.

Poverty often means lack of productive land. Lack of arable land caused by population growth and the uneven distribution of ownership leads to an expansion of the cultivation of marginal, ecologically sensitive areas of developing countries. The landless poor are forced to cultivate these areas due to lack of any other means of support.

Many of the poorest people in the world live in areas where lack of water is a serious problem. The situation - especially for the poor, who already have the most problems with water supply - is deteriorating as access to clean water decreases as a result of pollution and overconsumption in relationship to supply.

Loss of bio-diversity is a global problem which also has bearing on the life of poor people, a problem which has not yet been studied sufficiently. This problem consists of both loss of organisms which provide humans with an ecological service - eg as decomposition agent of organic material in arable soil or as the basis of a nutrition chain in a coastal environment - and in the loss of species which are used directly by humans, including genetically adapted varieties which have developed to suit local cultivation conditions. For many poverty stricken people in developing countries, wild plant and animal species play an important, sometimes decisive, role. People are directly threatened by the extinction of species because they are dependent on many of nature's products for their support and welfare. In Ghana, for example, 75% of the population are dependent on game, fish, insects, snails etc as their primary source of protein. In Nigeria, game forms 20% of the protein intake of rural populations. People in India use almost 1,000 wild species as medicinal herbs.

### Urban environment and pollution

Urbanisation is accelerating in developing countries and will continue at an equally rapid pace. By 2015, on average 59% of the population of developing countries will live in towns (3.5-3.9 thousand million people). A large and increasing proportion of developing country urban dwellers will belong to the poor, or poorest, groups in society. Groups dominated by women and children. These groups often live in unhealthy surroundings in the growing slum areas - without access to clean water and sufficient sanitary facilities, poor housing conditions, close to waste dumps and in severely polluted atmospheres. The infant mortality rate is often 2-5 times higher in slum areas than in other areas of the cities. An increasing number of poor people are therefore now experiencing a series of immediate environmental problems, which contribute to the exacerbation of their poverty, not least as poor health leads to decreased capacity for physical work.

Polluted water also leads to very serious health problems, especially for the poorest groups. According to WHO calculations, between 20 and 25 million people per year die from illnesses related to poor quality drinking water and UNICEF estimate that 5 million children die annually as a result of diarrhoea illnesses connected to unhygienic environments and polluted water. These health problems are caused by environmental pollution and can only be solved by improved water quality and more hygienic surroundings.

In addition to the above, another urban related environmental problem threatens, namely the costs associated with attempts to seal material biocycles. Nutritional elements from agriculture etc must be returned to the soil when the agricultural products have been consumed in the urban areas. At present, for example, carbon atoms disappear out to sea or up into the atmosphere instead of functioning as building blocks for future production of foodstuffs. *This environmental problem will, in the long run, affect the agricultural population in the rural areas, especially those who cannot afford fertiliser.*

Industrial pollution is a growing problem in developing countries. Many industries utilise obsolete technology which forms a serious threat to the environment. Industrial emissions are already extensive in certain places. The poor are affected both directly and indirectly. They are exposed to health risks because they often live close to the source of the emissions. They are also affected indirectly as pollutants decrease the productivity of fishing and agriculture. The often unregulated utilisation of chemical pesticides in agriculture leads to toxic risks for both human beings and the environment. In Latin America especially, landless peasants have been exposed to chemicals without proper protection and knowledge as to their effects and dangers.

### Population growth and the burden of support

Poverty often means high birthrates. Poorer groups in developing countries tend to produce more children than in the better-off industrialised countries. The factors causing this phenomenon - including economic factors - vary enormously. In many places poverty contributes to the high level of population growth, which in turn contributes to increased pressure on natural resources - often with increased environmental degradation and increased poverty as a result.

It is important to emphasise that rapid population growth is one of the most important factors influencing environmental degradation in developing countries. During the 90s alone, almost one thousand million people will be added to the population of the world, and almost all of this increase is to be found in developing countries.

In many areas where pressure of population density is already high in relation to the environment's carrying capacity, growth is occurring so rapidly that the adaptation of farming methods cannot keep pace. The consequences are that pressure on the natural resource base, like poverty, increases. The incredibly lengthy lead time needed to put the brakes on population growth means that, even in a best case scenario with rapidly decreasing family size, far more intensive measures must be applied right now if it is to be possible to both save the environment and decrease poverty in developing countries.

Continued environmental degradation inevitably leads to the shrinking of the natural resource base - in a world that has to support an additional 100 million or so people every year with food and water, fuel and housing. On top of this, demands on resources caused by striving for increases in welfare must be placed.

Some of the environmental problems observable in developing countries today are similar to that of the industrial world. However, the increasing population pressure and the varying ecological preconditions in developing countries, coupled with a more inequitable distribution of resources, results in these problems being, in many cases, far more serious in developing countries and for the poorer groups which form the majority of the population.

### **Security, vulnerability and ecological refugees**

Environmental degradation and access to natural resources will, in the future, increasingly underlay the development of national and international conflicts. The need for natural resources from outside the country forces the nations of the world to co-operate with each other, either at a benevolent or a destructive level. Lack of natural resources and exhaustion of the environment have already caused serious political and social unrest, national and international conflicts and acts of war in many countries of the world. The poorest are often most negatively affected and adverse environmental effects can occur on a secondary level as people are forced to flee from the fighting. Investment in sustainable utilisation of resources therefore becomes an important tool for increasing national and international security and can contribute to the avoidance of devastating conflicts.

Environmental degradation also exposes the poorest groups to increased risk from natural disasters and famine. The Ethiopian famine of the 80s was initiated by wide-scale environmental degradation. Floods have partially been caused by upstream deforestation. The concept ecological refugee has been created during the last few years. Millions of people - one estimate states that at present this number may be upwards of 25 million, mainly in Africa but also in other regions - have left their homes because the natural resources available there can no longer support them.

## THE MOST SERIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEM IN THE WORLD?

It is surprising how little has been written on poverty and the environment in spite of the fact that poverty has been described as "the most serious environmental problem in the world."

Indira Gandhi stated as early as 1972 at UN's environmental conference in Stockholm, that poverty polluted and that the struggle against poverty was also the struggle for a better environment. Otherwise discussions on the connection between poverty and the environment have only come to the forefront during the last few years.

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission established that poverty was one of the most important causes of environmental degradation. However the report only included a fairly superficial discussion on environmental degradation as a causal effect of increased poverty. As late as 1990, The World Bank wrote, "The links between environmental degradation and poverty are as yet poorly understood."

SIDA's analysis from 1991 published in the booklet "*The Environment and Poverty - Guidelines for SIDA's Development Assistance*" (Olsson and Segnestam) illustrated these connections in the context of SIDA's development assistance. At the request of Maurice Strong, General Secretary of UNCED, SIDA published a special version of this booklet for an international audience - "*Poverty, Environment and Development*". This was put at the disposal of the world community as a part of the preparation process for the UNCED.

UNCED was primarily concerned with the connections between development and environment and therefore also with the eradication of poverty as a precondition for sustainable development. The resulting action plan, *Agenda 21* includes a special chapter on the fight against poverty, but even here the analysis is extremely traditional and measures recommended not obviously related to environmental conservation.

During the last few years some publications have discussed this subject and a brief bibliography is listed below.

## COMPLEXITY UNDERESTIMATED

One basic point of departure is that there are no simple, general connections between environmental degradation and poverty. Connections are extremely complex and are inescapably influenced by the type of environmental problem under discussion, which groups of poor are affected, how poverty is defined etc. Increased poverty is often a result of the environmental destruction underway in developing countries and sometimes it is also its cause.

At societal level - global, national or local - poverty can be expressed in the form of declining natural resource capital and environmental degradation can result in costs in order to counteract negative environmental effects.

Certain types of environmental problems are more commonly caused by poverty - soil erosion, overgrazing, exhaustion of vegetation, deforestation (and with it loss of bio-diversity), coastal and marine environmental degradation and certain immediate environment problems. One characteristic in connection with poverty and this type of environmental degradation is often that it initiates a vicious circle or rather downward spiral. Overexploitation leads to increased poverty and consequently an increased tendency to overexploitation. The eradication of poverty is therefore, in many cases, a pre-condition of the elimination of these types of environmental degradation.

Connections between poverty and environmental degradation are both direct and indirect. Poverty contributes directly to environmental degradation through the fact that the poor simply do not possess, or cannot give up, the resources necessary to protect the environment. Poverty contributes indirectly to environmental degradation via the fact that it tends to be connected to a range of other problems, such as limited knowledge of new preconditions of supply, lack of land, high birthrate and sometimes a tendency to short-term, survival only thought processes.

It therefore must not be permitted to simplify the connection between environmental degradation and poverty in a misleading manner - poverty is not always connected to environmental degradation. There are many examples of extremely poor people, in traditionally expressed terms, who do not destroy the environment. Many poor people actually demonstrate a singular awareness and consideration for the environment in which they live. Furthermore there are examples too numerous to mention of extremely rich individuals and societies destroying the environment in a disastrous fashion. The populations of the richer countries at present cause - in both absolute and relative terms - the majority of the existing global threats, primarily emissions of chemicals, climate change and the thinning out of the ozone layer.

Democracy issues are important in the analysis of connections between the environment and poverty. Even when poorer groups are acutely aware of the consequences of environmental degradation, they seldom have the possibility to influence political decision makers who in many cases accept or even contribute to the environmental destruction underway in their countries. The poorer groups most dependent on natural resources are often ethnic minorities or other marginal groups with little or no influence on decisions which concern their own existence. This may apply to participation in the political decision making process, but also in other decisions which have consequences for the immediate environment of the family or the local society.

Poverty means limited resources to invest in the environment. Measures to protect the environment often require resources in the form of capital and work inputs. For a family living in extreme poverty there is often no chance, purely for reasons of survival, of sparing these resources, they represent too large a sacrifice in the daily battle to support the family. There is therefore often a tendency to give low priority to environmental protection measures, especially if the positive effects of these measures will not appear until long into the future and will generally benefit others. Sometimes the combination of lack of personal resources and limited access to credit means that the poorer groups are prevented from protecting the environment, even in those cases where it would be of immediate economic benefit for them to do so.

Poverty can result in limited ability to adapt. Poverty is often characterised by a strong reliance on traditional methods, which are often deeply rooted in the culture of poorer groups. In a rapidly changing world where interdependency is increasing, older knowledge becomes quickly out of date. When population growth and other processes of change eg altered social structure, press forward a need to adapt traditional methods, lack of knowledge concerning alternatives can suddenly become a serious obstacle to ecologically sustainable behaviour patterns. Poverty may also mean little or no knowledge of the side-effects of certain modern products such as chemical pesticides etc on people and the environment.

The importance of the speed of change cannot be emphasised enough concerning environmental effects in general, the exhaustion of the environment by poorer groups and the development of consumer habits. When the speed of many of the change processes is fast, poverty means that adaptation to alterations in the environment become difficult to deal with.

The picture is therefore more complicated than it may appear at first glance. The assumption that environmental problems will be solved if poverty is eradicated is not only wrong, but directly dangerous considering the limited possibilities that many poorer groups have to *break out of the downward spiral*. It is also an insult to poorer groups of people to describe a development scenario in which prosperity automatically leads to a solution to environmental problems.

However, economic growth is still necessary to assist the poorest groups. The focus is placed on the question: How can this take place within the framework of a more equitable society - local and global - and also within the framework of what the environment can bear - locally and globally?

The problem is not just generally complex, but also varies considerably from place to place and even from individual to individual.

## THE POOR AND THE RICH

### The poor are affected in the South

Environmental degradation affects developing countries in many ways and it is often the poorest who are affected the most as they are often directly dependent on natural resources for survival and have very few resources to counteract the negative effects of environmental degradation. In addition, the poor tend to live in places which are especially exposed to, and sensitive to, environmental degradation. The 20% poorest group in developing countries amounts to 800 million people. It has been estimated that approximately 60% of these, ie around 500 million people, live in areas which are seriously threatened by environmental degradation.

### The poor are affected by the North

Industrialised countries contribute to the creation of parts of the environmental degradation observable in developing countries. Emissions of green-house effect gases into the atmosphere, dumping of chemical waste in developing countries, export of banned pesticides to developing countries and import of cheap tropical timber are examples of how industrialised countries directly influence developing country environments. Environmental degradation in developing countries is also connected to the international world order: the debt crisis, raw material price developments, protectionism in industrialised countries etc. An environmental conservation and poverty eradication strategy for developing countries must also include measures in these areas, areas which lie outside conventional development assistance activities.

The poor are also threatened by global environmental problems which have primarily been caused by industrialised countries. Climate and sea level changes - possible results of the greenhouse effect - threaten the poor in developing countries more than those in industrialised nations. The poor in these countries are often worst affected as they often live in specially vulnerable areas and have few resources to protect themselves from negative external events.

Actually it is misleading to talk about "global environmental problems" - environmental problems which, to some extent, are shared by all the earth's population. Certain environmental effects can be global in character but environmental problems are definitely not, not from the poor people's perspective. The effects of climate change can be more easily dealt with in the Netherlands than in the coastal areas of Bangladesh or by a peasant in Botswana. In addition it is difficult to draw a line between global and other environmental problems.

Even if the causes of the global environmental threats are primarily production and consumption patterns in the industrialised world, widespread poverty in connection with environmental degradation form the major acute environmental threats to the South.

### **More rich people in the South**

There is a North in the South. Calculations carried out by the World Bank, among others, have shown that there are approximately as many purchasing consumers in developing countries as there are in all of Western Europe. The middle classes in countries such as Mexico, Malaysia and Chile, for example, utilise considerably more fossil fuel per capita than low income groups in Western Europe. The environmental problems caused by *developing country middle classes eg air pollution and extensive resource utilisation*, primarily threaten the poorest groups in these countries.

### **The Growth Concept**

Conventional economists have seldom been able to reflect the enormous complexity represented by nature and ecosystems which is a decisive difficulty when attempting to place a value on the different services provided by nature. For people, especially poor people, often irreplaceable values are in the balance when different ecosystems are exposed to extensive threats or devastation. These values cannot generally be found in the calculations carried out by governments, authorities and companies when decisions are made to clear forests, drain marshes, exploit coastal areas, utilise pesticides in agriculture or emit toxins from industries.

In the future, development must contain a much stronger qualitative element, a movement away from the strict connection to conventional economic growth measured in quantitative, monetary terms only.

The common growth objective is therefore not as given, and development objectives not as obvious, as we had thought.

#### TO CONSIDER - SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

One important implication of the connection between environment and poverty is that investment in the environment is, in many cases, synonymous with investment in development for the poorest groups in developing countries. In many places, environmental degradation forms a growing threat to poor peoples' chances of supporting themselves. If this environmental degradation is not stopped, the future will bring even more poverty than the present. Protection of the environment is therefore no luxury, something that the poor can worry about when they live their lives in comfort and safety. In many cases this objective is a fundamental pre-condition for future survival and development.

However, there can be a contradictory relationship between short and long term measures in a situation where resources are limited. Shall we ameliorate famine today or prevent famine tomorrow? This conflict between short and long term is a part of the development problem picture as such, both for the state and the individual - but this dilemma is specially obvious in connection with environmental problems. In the short run, the protection of the environment in certain cases will entail considerable costs. Many of the positive consequences of protecting the environment, however, only appear in the long term perspective - when the accumulated effects of polluted emissions cross the threshold of what nature can bear. At this point in time, many of today's decision makers will be dead. The incentives for these decision makers - even in a democratic system - to make difficult and, in the long term, necessary decisions today are therefore extremely small.

It is also important to be aware that there may be a conflict relationship between the benefit from different individuals' costs for protecting the environment. Poorer individuals and groups are sometimes those who are directly affected by short term environmental protection costs. There are many examples; poor people who lose their source of income because the forest they live in has become a nature reserve, shifting cultivators who are forced to move to other areas in order to decrease the pressure on the land, slum dwellers who are forced to leave because the area is to be cleared etc. It is extremely important to take into consideration the occurrence of conflicts between the immediate needs of the poorer groups and the long term needs of environmental protection - also a need of poorer groups - when environmental projects are designed.

Eradication of poverty is not a sufficient precondition for the solution of environmental problems. Poverty interacts with a number of other factors when causing the environmental destruction now observable in developing countries. It is poverty in combination with these other causes which creates environmental degradation. As long as these causes remain, people - both rich and poor in developing countries - will continue to overburden their environment. These causes primarily include:

- lack of ownership and user rights to natural resources;
- uneven distribution of land ownership;
- high level of population growth;
- erroneous economic policies;
- market failures;
- lack of knowledge;
- absence of democratic instruments of control.

These factors can, to a greater or lesser degree, be linked to poverty. However, they are not only related to the poverty problem but also contribute to environmental degradation which threatens everyone.

A further conclusion is that economic development for the poorest in certain cases is a pre-condition for arresting environmental destruction. The existence of a causal effect chain from poverty to environmental degradation does not, however, mean that developing countries' problems with the environment would automatically cease if they became as rich as industrialised countries. This has already been mentioned and is a totally futile thought. The real message is that the abolition of extreme poverty through growth and/or redistribution of resources is often a pre-condition for stopping environmental degradation. The poor must be provided with the resources and knowledge to be able to protect their environment - for their own sake. Economic growth for the majority, however, of the type observable in the Western world is just as much of a threat to the environment in the third world as it is a solution to its problems. Economic growth is essential in the third world, but it must happen within the framework of sustainable development - development within the framework of the sustainability of ecosystems.

Success in the struggle against global environmental threats requires that political, economic and social systems are designed in such a way that the social preconditions of man and womankind are in balance with sustainable development. This is not possible in a world characterised by deep economic and social injustices, in which one hundred million people live in deepest poverty. This view is expressed in the fifth principle of the Rio Declaration which states that " In order to decrease the differences in living standards and to better fulfil the needs of the majority of the population of the world, all states and peoples must co-operate in the essential task of eradicating poverty which is a prerequisite for sustainable development." A fair and reasonable resource distribution policy is therefore necessary at both national and international levels.

Market forces do not pay sufficient attention either to environmental degradation or to the conditions of the poor. The role of both the state and the market must therefore be considered when environmental policies are designed and poverty eradication measures implemented. Ecological economic instruments of measurement and steering, social analyses in relationship to environmental problems and institutional development in the environmental area are becoming increasingly important, if not vital, for the solution of environment-related poverty problems.

## HOW TO HANDLE THESE PROBLEMS

### Three categories

From a practical point of view, activities aimed at utilising the connection environment/development for both the improvement of human welfare and environmental conditions can be divided into three different categories:

- Activities aimed at the development of resources. The goal is to improve the material situation and production methods of the poorest groups and thereby their opportunities to "invest" in the future - something which enables the poorest groups to desist from consuming their natural capital.
- Activities aimed at human development, eg health, nutrition and education, which decrease population growth, improve utilisation of resources and enable rational choices concerning its possibilities.
- Activities aimed at political development to ensure that support reaches the correct target groups thereby providing a voice and influence for the poor and which creates the right incentives in economic policies for the promotion of environmentally sound and sustainable development.

### Strategy

A strategy for the fight against poverty which also fulfils objectives concerning sustainable management of the environment, should contain the following elements:

- Effective utilisation of work force, which is the primary asset of the poor.
- Ownership of physical assets, natural resources and other capital by eg the regulation of land ownership rights.
- Increase of yields of the different types of capital owned by the poorer groups eg by supplying infrastructure such as roads and general communications, attainable credit conditions and technology.

- Development of human capital through access to improved health care, nutrition and education.
- Improved living conditions eg through the supply of clean water and sanitary facilities.
- Increased environmental knowledge and developed environmental institutions.

### Critical areas of activity

According to the governmental study "Sustainable Development", the following areas of activity are specially critical in assistance aimed at the eradication of poverty through sustainable development:

#### \* Food and water supply/natural resource base

- water resources/utilisation
- sustainable agriculture
- marine environment/coastal areas
- bio-diversity
- forests

#### \* Urban environmental problems

- waste/sewage
- transport

#### \* Capacity development

- institutional development
- education, training
- environmental economics
- NGOs

- \* energy systems
- \* population development

Two general areas, which from the perspective of sustainable development - both being social aspects which consider demands for sustainable utilisation of natural resources - appear to be fundamental to the survival of poorer groups and their chances of improved living conditions. The first is water and food supply which is regulated by the natural resource base. The other is the environmental problems connected to rapid urbanisation, especially the waste/sewage/pollution problems. In addition, development assistance to capacity development, competence development and institutional development in the environmental area take a prominent place.

Activities must be based on local participation, influence and "ownership" concerning measures within the framework of democratic political systems at both local and central levels. The development of such systems must be promoted. Finally population development must be paid special attention both as far as the provision of food and water is concerned and for improvement of sexual and reproductive health, including opportunities to utilise family planning.

It is important to increase awareness of the fact that the connections between the environment and poverty vary according to environmental problem, geographical area, social group and for women and men within these social groups. For this reason a general analysis must always be complemented by analyses at country and local levels before specific activities aimed at the solution of environmental and poverty-related problems are designed. This may be carried out, inter alia, within the framework of the environmental profiles produced by SIDA for the Swedish Programme Countries. The necessity of interest group analyses must also be emphasised in relationship to the environment problem picture - women are, for example, often primary actors in these contexts.

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