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Research Matters

The Real Costs of Third-World Development

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Not long ago, FOX News featured a story critical of the tactics of an environmental group called the Rainforest Action Network. The article criticized the group for victimizing “the world’s poorest children and families” by convincing U.S. lenders to pull funding for Third-World dam construction and other development projects.

“Countries are deprived of investment dollars to generate electricity, create jobs, improve health, education and nutrition, build modern homes and businesses, and instill hope for the future,” the story goes on to say. “People in the Third World need economic development. It’s the only truly sustainable solution for them.”

This is not an uncommon stance from the developed world; it stems from a long-held belief that development unquestionably improves the lives of Third-World inhabitants. Yet, I—and many others like me—find this too simple a position, too one-sided about a complex reality. As someone who has witnessed both the benefits and deleterious effects of development on indigenous people—my own research has centered on the nation of Lesotho and on some of the thousands resettled because of the multi-dam Lesotho Highlands Water Project planned to ease South Africa’s need for water—I join those in support of more thorough research into the highly contentious issue of Third-World development. That is, more research into the experiences of resettled indigenous people and on the long-term effects on family and community life. What’s needed is a sensitive delving into the sociological and cultural ramifications of development, rather than simply assuming that Third-World nations, so often portrayed in the media as “childlike” and unable to care for themselves, are waiting for development to rescue them from their plight.

One idea to challenge is that which promotes development as “charity” that we—developed nations—are bestowing upon these “others” living in more “primitive” states. The true bottom line is that these “others” who are disproportionately impacted by large-scale development projects, the poorest of the earth’s poor, are actually subsidizing their own resources to make these projects happen. In Lesotho, for example, we witnessed material losses of agricultural and grazing land, houses, fuel wood, and medicinal plants. We saw firsthand the psychological costs of insecurity, increased pressure on resources, and more social conflict (including increased gender inequality). Because of the dam project, many lived in a cloud of uncertainty, powerlessness, and fear that only exacerbated their existing poverty in gendered ways.

As a society, we seem to have internalized a belief that knowledge, money, and help are

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going in only one direction—from us to them. Yet, it's the people in these villages, making their living from the limited land and economic opportunities available, who will give up their homes, their culture, their community, and their lands so their neighboring country can have more water.

Is it to the benefit of these people to sacrifice what has belonged to their families for sometimes thousands of years? Do development projects sweep away the hardships of poverty and isolation? Hardly ever. The villages I visited in Lesotho, for example, were promised electricity from the construction of these massive dams, but electricity has yet to arrive. In the meantime, displaced and impacted Basotho villagers are allotted bags of mostly substandard grain in exchange for family farms now under water; they have lost access to a river and riverbeds that they depended on—it is now impossible for most villagers to get across a waterway that was once a lifeline. Some families will never again see loved ones who once lived merely across the river but now live across a reservoir too expansive to cross.

The FOX News story claims that only development can stop the 'bleak picture' of rampant illness from lack of decent food and water. "The death



toll equates to about forty jumbo jets with kids crashing every day," the article states, "a death toll that can only be alleviated by economic development."

And yet, there is little evidence that this "economic development"—in most of its current forms—improves the impoverished states of villages. In fact, poverty becomes often further entrenched. In Lesotho, for instance, the local poor impacted by the project were not hired for construction projects, but rather hundreds of foreign workers were brought in. These foreign workers lived in gated communities, ate expensive, imported food, and eventually coerced local young women, desperate for income, to become temporary "wives," taking

care of the home and providing sex. Now most of the foreign workers are gone, and so is that employment, horrible as it was. Left in the wake of the construction are shattered families, destroyed communities.

You don't often hear about such incidents in development literature. Reports created by the World Bank and other such agencies tend to ignore the longer-term social impacts of Third-World development—relying instead on simple data, such as whether or not families received their annual grain compensation.

The good news is that indigenous people in Third-World communities are beginning to make their own voices heard in powerful ways. Most people in these impoverished communities want development, but not as currently implemented—they want to determine the conditions and terms. From steel mills in India to dam projects in South America, impacted villagers are challenging the ways they are forced to give up their natural resources, their homes, and their way of life. Those of us in developed countries most interested in the snarl of social complications caused by Third-World development need to support these challenges, provide alternative analyses, and continue to encourage a more honest appraisal of development itself.