

# WORLD DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT: TOWARDS A MORE CHILD-FRIENDLY ECONOMIC ORDER IN 21st CENTURY

*J.V. Vilanilam\**

**THIS IS** an adults' world, more particularly adult men's world. The environment question is often discussed from the adults' point of view; this is natural because children do not have spokesmen and they cannot be expected to have spokesmen. But some adults including mothers have to become the spokes-persons for children.

The environment question is all too often discussed in isolation from the World Development Question, but the fact remains that the quality of environment can be improved only when there is some re-thinking on the Development Question.

Despite all the scientific and technological development achieved during the past three centuries or more, the world is still one of hunger and thirst, homelessness and inadequate protection from the elements for the large majority of people living in the Afro-Asian-Latin American (AALA) regions.

More than a billion people on Planet Earth, 20 percent of the world's population, are facing hunger every day. It has been observed :

Furthermore, the odds are that your children will suffer, one way or another from the fallout from the rabid race between global hunger, rampant environmental degradation, and population growth gone berserk.<sup>1</sup>

By the year 2025, the number of the hungry will increase by another billion, it is estimated. Most of those affected will be children.

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\* M.A. (Banaras), M.S. (Temple, USA) D. Litt. (Bhagalpur), Ph.D. (Amsterdam) from 1992 onwards is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kerala, Trivandrum..

1. Nabil Megalli, "Hunger versus the Environment: a Recipe for Global Suicide," *Our Planet* (Magazine of the UN Environment Program, UNEP), vol.4, No.6, p.4. (1992).

During this last decade of the 20th century, we see the birth of a larger number of children in the AALA regions. On the one hand, literacy and education spread in these regions but on the other, quality of life declines for the richer and poorer sectors alike because of the wrong priorities of development. The engines of development are destroying the natural resources in such unprecedented manner that the environmental quality is affected by the rapid deterioration in the quality of air, water and food.

There was a time when the poor could depend on the natural resources without any restrictions for satisfying their meagre needs. Natural resources were not depleted in any great measure because of this use. But when industrial exploitation of natural resources started in a big way, restrictions had to be imposed even on the rural population.

When traditional modes of production were replaced by factory-type production, the rural population had to migrate to big industrial centres for their livelihood. Man became a slave to machines and the rural ways of living and traditional structures of society were replaced by mechanical ways of urban living. Human beings became dependents on the machine even for the production of those goods that were essential for meeting the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter.

This has been, and still is, going on relentlessly with deep sociological, psychological and economic impact on the poor of the world who could not be absorbed into the modern ways of living. The most affected section of the world's population is that of children because children have to depend on adults who lose their traditional social security net and sources of income. Such adults cannot take care of their children and children become

helpless wanderers for survival. Some of them become victims of child labour exploiters, under world leaders and pimps. Sometimes they become the main breadwinners of the family since their parents are too weak or ill to support the family. For sheer survival in an adult world, they willingly or not so willingly subject themselves to all sorts of indignity. This is what the socio-economic environment does to children.

But children are also the first victims of environmental degradation. Their problems start right from conception; their growth in the womb is affected by the malnutrition of the poor mother who is unable to feed herself properly during pregnancy. The child is affected during the postnatal period too. The mother's breast-milk is contaminated by toxic chemicals in her environment -- the polluted food she eats, the polluted air she breathes and the unsanitary conditions she lives in.

Coupled with the problems of unwanted pregnancy, illiteracy of the parents, unhealthy living, ignorance about childcare, etc., is the more fundamental problem of the fear of the parents about child survival. However laudable the attempts to eradicate illiteracy and raise the level of understanding about contraception are, their fear of child survival is not easily surmountable. The more the number of children, the better the probability of survival of a few of them, they know from experience. This is why Julius Nyerere once observed: "The most powerful contraceptive is the knowledge that your children will survive."<sup>2</sup>

It is estimated that some 14 million children under the age of five die every year (40,000 per day) in the AALA regions from hunger, malnutrition, unclean drinking water and poor sanitation. Another three million are seriously disabled. Breastfeeding, oral dehydration therapy and creation of better living conditions can prevent such deaths and disablement, they say, but unless environmental protection is ensured, none of these preventive measures will

succeed. It is encouraging that international agencies such as the UNEP, UNICEF and World Bank are devoting some attention to the primary importance of environmental safety in sustainable development. It is quite some time since we started hearing about the importance of the environment. Are we making any concrete progress in developing countries as far as the greening of the environment for enabling children to survive in a hostile world is concerned? Are children of today going to inherit an environmentally safe world from us?

We have talked so far about children in the AALA regions. This does not mean that the children of the rest of the world, the so-called ENAJ (Europe, North America and Japan) countries are environmentally safe. Far from it. In fact, the awareness about environmental degradation started in those countries. The increase of carcinogenic chemicals in the environment, radiation hazards, the toxic dumps in chemical factory sites, the dumping of hazardous nuclear and other wastes in the rivers and seas, the massive spilling of oil in the oceans from giant tankers that meet with accident, the hole in the ozone layer and its connection with halogenated hydrocarbons, the fattening of beef and other forms of meat-producing animals by steroids and other cancer-causing chemicals, global warming, the dangers of DDT and other pesticides, insecticides and herbicides, the nonbiodegradable detergents -- all these were brought to the world's attention by the EJAJ countries. Whereas the environmentalists in AALA countries are more known for their opposition to tree-felling and deforestation, their counterparts in other areas are more known for their opposition to processes and products involving hazardous and radioactive substances.

But neither the developed nor the developing countries have been able to stop the rape of nature by money-friendly people. Nor have they cared enough for the children of the world, some 1.5 billion of them, who are helpless victims of natural pollution and environmental degradation.

One might ask in righteous indignation: Are

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2. Cited in *Children and the Environment*, Geneva: UNICEF, p.1 (1990).

there not laws against children. the future inhabitants of the earth? There are laws, certainly.<sup>2a</sup>

### Who is a child?

First let us examine if there is any consensus on the age of the child at the international level. The ILO and the UN Population Division consider all under 15 years of age as children. The first Minimum Age (Industry) convention passed in 1919 prohibited employment of children under 14 years of age in industries. Gradually, this Minimum Age convention was extended to employment in sea (1921), agriculture (1921), non-industrial employment (1922), coal mines (1953), fishermen (1959) and underground work (1965). In 1973, the ILO adopted a comprehensive convention concerning Minimum Age for admission to employment (Convention No. 138) aiming at total abolition of child labour.<sup>3</sup> And the Convention on the Rights for the Child (1989) considers everyone below 18 a child unless majority is attained earlier under the law.

Child labour in some form or other has been in existence from early centuries, either in the domestic sector or in religious organizations and in orphanages and monasteries of Asia and Europe. But in those centuries, children were perhaps *not* utilized in any hazardous situation. What happened in the 18th and 19th centuries was entirely different. The Industrial Revolution was the result of changed processes and modes of production. The sudden upsurge in the demand for goods led to demand for more hands. Entrepreneurs who were enamoured by profits found nothing wrong in employing the cheap or even practically free labour of children. Large-scale migrations from rural areas to urban areas led to surplus labour in industrial towns; and men, women and children had to take any hazardous job that was offered. Employers' awareness about environmental safety was also not high.

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2a. See Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer's *Environmental Pollution and the Law, and the Jains' Environment Laws in India*, for a comprehensive list of laws.

3. Indira Hirway, Jacqui Cottyn and Pushkar Pandya (ed.), *Towards Eradication of Child Labour*, 45-6 (1991).

Children as well as adults had to work longer hours for paltry wages. They had to work in dirt, soot and dust, inhale toxic fumes and fine particles, eat even as they worked nonstop - thus unknowingly endangering their respiratory, cardiovascular, gastro-intestinal and central nervous systems, which meant the whole body. They died prematurely. In courses of time, adult workers succeeded in getting their working hours reduced, but children were clandestinely forced to work longer hours, especially in small-scale and cottage industries.

Children's and women's contributions to the economy were not given proper weightage even by labour unions of those days. There are still many unorganized sectors of labour - domestic hands, for example. There are hundreds of match factors and fire cracker makers in remote rural areas of India where under-age children as well as adult women are employed in occupationally hazardous situations. Only when a major accident occurs in any such outfit will the general public know about this. For socio-economic reasons, not only children and women but also men willingly work in such dangerous situations. But children are the most vulnerable victims

### Failure of laws

The laws against child labour may or may not work in places of employment because of surplus labour and scarce jobs, and because of endemic poverty. This was the case not only of partially industrialized 19th century Indian towns, but of European towns of the 18th and 19th centuries. There were laws against child labour and there were measures for child protection in Europe from mid-18th century onwards, as can be seen from Appendix . Today there are laws in almost all countries of the world.

In India, the Royal Commission on Labour (1929), the Labour Investigation Committee (1944), the National Commission of Labour (1966), the Gurupadaswamy Committee on Child Labour (1979) and the Sanat Mehta Committee (1986) and various others have from time to time drawn the attention of the

government and the public to the great need for protecting children from child labour exploiters. However, even today, we have the largest number of children in the work force. It has been observed :

Unofficial figures of child labour are in the range of 44 to 100 million<sup>4</sup>, 91% of it being in the rural areas, particularly in the plantation, beedi, handloom, weaving, match, fire works and glass bangle industries.

This situation is inevitable in the present socio-economic situation. Which is more acceptable morally and ethically - denial of some avenue for the children to earn a pittance to ward off daily starvation, or letting them work for survival even in patently dangerous situations at the cost of health and education? Unless society succeeds in organizing work in such a manner that the absolutely poor 300 to 350 million adults (men and women) earn decent wages to protect themselves and their children from poverty and starvation, no amount of legislation will make any dent on the mammoth edifice of child labour in India.

The failure in reaching the constitutional goal of universal primary education, in preventing the substantial school dropout phenomenon, in lowering the national infant mortality rate to any great extent - all these are directly connected to the failure in providing sources of steady income to the absolutely poor. The development that we see at the top is confined to the urban and rural rich. Science and technology have been utilized in a major way for that development. At the same time they have not been used to provide avenues of employment to the large army of unemployed adults who constitute the absolutely poor. Provision of a steady source of income through meaningful work and through it literacy, education and hygienic living conditions alone can lower birthrates and protect the children. The new employment generation activities have to give proper stress on environmental issues. Otherwise it will be mere lipservice to

environmental causes. If the industries which are being set up are aimed at short-term but huge monetary gains for the entrepreneurs, whether in urban, semi-urban or rural areas, the laws for protecting children and the environment will be honoured more in the breach than in their observance.

### **New development strategies**

It is not the large-scale industries or huge commercial enterprises that are going to achieve the goal of providing employment avenues for the absolutely poor, but the small scale industries with the primary goal of setting up environmentally safe units serving the employment needs of the community around. Such a communitarian approach with an eye on the safety of all-adults and children - and with the readiness to use safe modern technological production methods and processes (and there are many) which will help produce those goods essential to satisfy the need of the many rather than the greed of the few. This alone can make the world safe for the children. Call this Gandhian, Sarvodaya, Green Peace or the "small-is-beautiful" approach, but is there a better approach good enough for the eradication of child labour in a country like ours with hundreds of millions of children forced to work at tender ages because of absolute poverty? If there is a better method for establishing a society based on equity, justice, love and concern for fellow beings, we must certainly opt for it. But till then, let us at least show more practical wisdom and real concern for the absolutely poor of the AALA regions through re-thinking the present development strategies even as we strengthen and implement necessary laws governing the environment.

It is poverty that lead children to hazardous jobs and life situation. It is poverty of the majority that tempts the minority to exploit the former's vulnerability. It is poverty that leads the rural folk to encroach upon the forest, but it is their weakness and ignorance that permit the few from the urban areas to embark upon acts of deforestation on a massive scale. The victims of all this are the poor and the helpless including children particularly in the hilly and tribal areas.

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4. B.B. Patil, "Child Labour in India: Dimensions, Issues and the Policies", *id.* at 113-34.

Without belittling the big strides made in legislation during the past one hundred or so years in India and elsewhere, and without de-emphasizing the need for vigilance over child labour in all parts of the world, especially in AALA regions, may I quote from the World Development Report to underline the importance of connecting development strategies to whatever we do in the fields of environmental health and child labour laws. And I quote:

Despite good progress over the past generation, more than one billion people still live in acute poverty and suffer grossly inadequate access to the resources education, health services, infrastructure, land, and credit - required to give them a chance for a better life.... But although the desirability of development is universally recognized, recent years have witnessed rising concern about whether environmental concerns will limit development and whether development will cause serious environmental damage, in turn impairing the quality of life of this and future generations. Humanity's stake in environmental protection is enormous.. *Alleviating poverty is both morally imperative and essential for environmental sustainability.*<sup>5</sup>

Without a healthy development strategy,

there cannot be any healthy environment. Without a healthy environment, there cannot be any peace, prosperity or well-being either for children or for adults of this and the coming generations.

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8. *The World Development Report: Development and the Environment*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1992.

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5. World Development Report (1992).

## APPENDIX

### **Chronology of child labour, child protection measure laws and workers' resistances against child labour in Germany**

- 16th/17th century onwards      Child labour introduced in orphanages to ensure economic survival.
- From approx, 1750      "Lending out" of orphan children as cheap labour to entrepreneurs.
- 1788      The poor Disposition of hambburg with financial incentive for attending poor school.
- 1821      Evening school for child factory workers Iscrlahn.
- 1827      The celebrated bourgeois pedagogue F.A. Diesterweg questions the permissibility of child labour and the utilitarian stand pint of industrial pedagogues.
- 1827      The Government of Arnsberg promulgates school regulations for children employed in factories.
- 1827      General Heinrich Wilhelm von Horn complains of the inability of the industrial areas to adequately complement the ranks of the Army.
- 1828      The King of Prussia prohibits night work for children in an order of the Council.
- 1839      Regulation of child labour in factories: Supervisory law for the textile industry: Prohibition of child labour below nine years of age. Maximum hours of work fixed at 10 hours, with a two hours break at noon, and prohibition of work on Sundays, holidays and at night.
- 1840      First Labour Protection Ordinance for children in Kingdom of Bavaria.
- 1840      First Child Protection Ordinance in Baden.
- 1842      Prohibition of female labour and the employment of children below 10 in mines.
- 1855      Law on the engagement of factory inspectors for the well-being of young workers.
- 1853      The Prussian Government prohibits factory work for children below 12.
- 1866      The First International condemns child labour and calls for solidarity on this issues.
- 1891      Amendment to the Industrial Regulation of 1878. Prohibition of factory work for children of school-going age and lower age limit for child workers in factories in factories raised from 12 to 13 years.
- 1910      The Child Protection Commission of the SPD and the Trade Union Commission of the Berlin call for a ban on children of school-going age being recruited for any kind of wage employment.

Source: Indira Hirway, *et al (ed), Towards Eradication of Child Labour : An International View 67 (1991).*

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