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Uganda - Arise and Shine

- Goal 10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 12 - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 15 - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems

The impact that inequality has on sustainable consumption and the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems is great. The interrelation is more apparent when viewed from outside of North America. In Canada, I live a sheltered life in terms of my environmental impact and sustainable use of resources: living within a neoliberal/globalized/post-industrial/capitalist state, I go to a store to buy any resource that I need or use. From my phone to my food to my clothing, I am disconnected from where the resources that I use come from, where the items were fabricated, how far they had to travel, and who made them. More often, I only see the impact of my consumption through a camera/video lens most of the resources and labour I consume comes from places such as Bangladesh, the DRC, or Mexico. The true value and cost of my consumption is obscured by the complex economy that I live in: the items that I buy don't reflect the true environmental or social cost of their production.

However, while the consumption of those living in 'typical' North America is obscured through technocratic/bureaucratic and economic mechanisms, the negative environmental and social impact is arguably greater than most people living in the 'developing world'. If we, in Canada, could see the true social cost of what we consume and the sheer amount of resources that we use, we would be astounded. And, if there was a side-by-side comparison of consumption levels against the average Ugandan, I believe we would be astonished. In part due to economic inequality among and between countries, those living in poverty often use less resources and have a smaller environmental footprint. For example, 1 American consumes as many resources as 35 people living in India and as many goods and services as 53 people living in China<sup>1</sup>. These comparisons exemplify how Western lifestyles are unsustainable and, ultimately, destructive.

From my observations in Uganda, for many, there is less of a disconnect between what you use day-to-day and where it comes from. For people living in rural areas, many grow their own foods, gather wood to use as fuel, and collect water from bore-holes/rivers/lakes. While in certain ways, the standards of living have increased risks of certain health conditions, living in rural/remote areas with more basic standards of living appears to be incredibly environmental. When I have visited the village that we work in, there appears to be much less garbage, less pollution, less consumption, less waste. In my opinion, those living in villages have much more sustainable consumption patterns than I do.

However, when you extrapolate what happens in 1 village to an entire country, there are some destructive patterns that emerge, such as deforestation. You begin to see that using resources that are close by, such as wood for cooking fuel and cutting down forests for agriculture has a deleterious effect on terrestrial ecosystems. Some of these patterns are repeated in other areas, such as in Haiti, where the juxtaposition of the Haitian/Dominican Republic border exemplifies the impact that poverty/inequality can have on the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/american-consumption-habits/>. Accessed August 27, 2016.



Figure 1 - Environmental degradation from Haiti vs Dominican Republic<sup>2</sup>

Inequality and poverty can increase reliance on the natural environment and make people more vulnerable to changes in the environment. However, while poverty can exacerbate environmental degradation, it is important to remember that parts of Central America was deforested for banana production for American consumption, the South Pacific is undergoing deforestation for palm oil production, and much of the Amazon is being cut to make way for cattle grazing - these global forces of consumption happen at a massive scale and can severely impact local communities.

The link between economic inequality, consumption and the ecosystem is direct, but also very messy. However, the direct impact of climate change/environmental destruction/consumption is unavoidable for those living in poverty, as they do not have the choice to pay their way out of their present circumstances. Simultaneously, aimlessly attempting to reduce inequality through poverty reduction/increased consumption is not an effective solution if it doesn't take into account who, what, why, how much, and how resources are used. Given these factors, we need to be thoughtful and strategic and specific about what we mean about equality. Economic equality shouldn't only be about increasing consumption or achieving Western lifestyles. Equality should give people the ability to have a choice, and the means of implementing the choices. In the present world, there are many intersectional ways that people experience inequality of choice, and 'development' can potentially be another way to create structures of power which limit people's choices, through further incorporation into capitalist systems. We need to be clear regarding our definition of sustainable consumption and production. This means standing strong against corporations that harm the environment, increasing regulations in Western countries around consumption and resource use, demystifying the West as the bearer of solutions, and acting in solidarity with other countries to determine what they want to do and how they want to do it.

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<sup>2</sup> Picture from: <http://www.forumbiodiversity.com/showthread.php/42243-Dominican-Rep-plans-to-built-wall-on-its-border-with-Haiti>. Accessed August 27, 2016.