

# 1. Abundance and equity

Did you read the news today? Depending on which country of the world you are located in you might have seen stories about new oil fields in Brazil, new mining areas in Mexico, oil shale developments in Jordan, new tar sand exploitation in Canada, new land investments in Ethiopia, destruction of ancient forests in India, and new palm oil plantations in Malaysia or biodiesel developments in the EU. No matter where you are – stories about extraction of natural resources are increasingly prominent in today's media coverage.

These stories suggest that only by extracting more resources can the world achieve economic growth and will thereby be able to prosper and combat poverty. Since natural resources are considered scarce, only a more efficient use may continue today's economic growth and the predominant development model. The commodity super-cycle of high demand and high prices has indeed fuelled economic growth and helped to lift thousands of people out of poverty in many countries. The right to development is a precious yet contentious one: which development path, for whom, at what cost? For those left behind in the current model the human story behind the headlines is one of natural disasters, climate change impacts, poverty, hunger and inequality, corruption, unemployment and ever more precarious forms of employment and migration.

It is often not expressed or even understood what most forms of resource exploitation have in common: ecosystem integrity and basic human rights are ignored; people are disempowered and human rights are sacrificed for an economic model that works neither for the majority of people nor for the planet.

This Memorandum offers a new perspective on how to look at the relationship between humans and nature. In order to do so, it challenges some of the basic assumptions of mainstream economics. In contrast to the prevailing assumption, nature itself is not scarce. It has a great potential to restore, reproduce and renew structures, organisms and processes. From a biological perspective nature is abundant. The problem is not nature; the problem is the human relationship with nature. Seeing nature through narrow neoclassical economic perspectives has become the standard for many societies. With such a lens, only the individual chunks of nature and their monetary value become visible and are turned into «resources». Some of these resources are renewable, others are not – at least not on human timescales. Hence, nature is not scarce but it is under stress due to the intense way humans use, pollute and destroy it.

The concept of scarcity is not only applied to nature but is embedded into many cultures, lifestyles and aspirations. Battles for finite resources are under way within societies. But having more does not automatically mean being better off. Constant hoarding with the fear to fall behind in the competitive race to secure one's share is

impacting on people's wellbeing and social relations. Tim Jackson's quote that we are «persuaded to spend money we don't have on things we don't need to create impressions that won't last on people we don't care about»<sup>1</sup> captures well the Western lifestyle that is seen as the norm by many people around the world.

There is a difference between exploiting natural resources and making sustainable use of nature to secure human rights, livelihoods and a decent standard of living. Part of that difference is respect for those who suffer from exploitation, respect for nature and respect for future generations. Are forests sites of timber extraction, sites of ecosystem conservation or habitats for people? Are healthy soils the basis of food security, livelihoods and a rich pool of biodiversity or are they a scarce asset for agricultural production and thus easily turned into an asset for speculation? When nature is considered a resource, it will always seem scarce.

Today the world is a highly unequal place in which a small number of people live lifestyles that would require several planets if all inhabitants of the earth were to follow suit, while the majority of people do not have access to the resources they need to survive and fulfil their basic needs. The perspective of scarcity has tipped our world out of balance. We will only create equity if we dare to reconnect between ecological sustainability, social justice and democracy.

In this Memorandum the notion of *Resource Politics* is introduced to guide critical analysis and inform strategies to change who controls and uses nature in which way. *Resource Politics* proposes to look at current conflicts around resource use as a complex set of interactions between nature, humans, interests, power relations and cultures in *different territories* (local, regional, global). This perspective offers solutions that protect the rights of people and nature. It questions the very notion of nature as a resource and thus creates freedom to think about transformative strategies.

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1 [www.ted.com/speakers/tim\\_jackson](http://www.ted.com/speakers/tim_jackson)