

2. Drivers of environmental stress and inequity

Evidence of the predominant, unfair and unsustainable economic model abounds everywhere and every day. Studies of ecosystem sensitivity provide ample proof of the incompatibility of constant economic growth with natural restorative and reproductive cycles, and there is more than enough evidence of the human rights violations that result from excessive resource extraction and use. However, the existing institutions, the policies, laws and regulations they adopt and the politics that shape their enforcement are currently not seeking to stop the trends. The opposite is true: the last few years have witnessed a new dimension of a global resource grab that intensifies the already high pressure on nature and human rights.

a) Ecological injustice: a planet out of balance

Humans are overstepping several environmental risk points at the same time and at increasing speed. The resulting destruction is partly irreversible and very often taking place in areas that were previously untouched by human interventions. Humans are not only emitting more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than can be absorbed, they have also long overstepped other important ecological risk points. Loss of biodiversity and nitrogen cycles are two of the «planetary boundaries» that are currently being overstepped – both on the global and in many cases on the local and national levels. Moving beyond these balance points means unpredictable changes for humanity's wellbeing. Scientists are just beginning to predict how the different environmental risks are interconnected. The tipping points of the planetary system may be much closer than currently assumed.

The fossil resources that fuel today's production systems are finite resources with reproduction cycles way beyond human timescales. The same is true of the fertile soil that can be used for the production of either food, or fuel and fibre – and which is lost on a dramatic scale day by day outside the public gaze.

b) Socio-economic injustice: unfair distribution and unequal access

One important fact is easily overlooked when focusing on the ecological dimension of mounting global consumption: there are still millions of people around the world who are using far less than their «fair share» of natural resources and carbon storage capacity. Millions of people around the world have no access to clean drinking water, energy, adequate food and nutrition or basic health services. Gender, age, race or

ethnic belonging and other social factors are important in determining access, distribution and power. A patriarchal system gives women little power in decision-making. Children's and future generations' rights are under assault and they have no voice in the decisions that will determine their futures and livelihoods.

While the planetary boundaries mark the natural limits of the Earth, human rights and basic social and economic needs define a minimum foundation. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: «Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.» This is what governments signed on to and this is what they need to be held accountable for. Economic systems, lifestyles, consumption patterns and cultures must not undermine this common goal.

Even though, globally, GDP disparity between countries is shrinking slightly, inequality within countries is increasing. Except for Latin America the Gini coefficient, which measures income distribution within societies, is developing negatively all around the world. The gap between haves and have-nots is not only widening, but also becoming more complex. A small but growing global elite is consuming far beyond its fair share. The global middle class (for which there is no globally agreed definition) is growing in total numbers, but its share of the global population will only increase slightly. Most African countries – regions with major population growth – will hardly participate in this trend. One thing is clear: the current economic model is failing millions and millions of people and violating their human rights in order to serve the demands of the growing urban middle classes. The right to development is hard to defend in a system that reproduces inequalities and environmental destruction day by day. It can only be defended by redefining development pathways, production patterns, livelihoods and global solidarity.

c) Lack of real democracy: procedural injustice, material inequity and unequal voices

Political upheavals in various countries around the world are transforming political systems – leading to more rights and more participation in some instances while in many others spaces for democratic decision-making and participation are shrinking rapidly. In several countries laws have been changed in recent years to hamper civil society engagement. Moreover, civil society involvement is not only legally restricted by the state. Often enough civil rights are violated where they at least exist in law: civil society actors, environmental activists, women's rights advocates and local community leaders are being persecuted, threatened and sometimes killed – despite the fact that their governments have signed onto international treaties and have binding national laws to implement them.

Ecosystems and knowledge systems that are not privately or publicly owned and thus not captured and controlled by the market economy are in danger of becoming

either wiped out or enclosed by the market logic. The commons – not only a thing or a shared resource, but the social interactions, rules and institutions that guide their use and distribution sustainably and equitably – are under severe pressure. This is undermining the livelihoods of those who depend on the commons and defend them.

Furthermore, ever more power is being concentrated in the hands of very few people and corporations. This is especially true for the natural resource sector (mining, oil and gas, agriculture), but also for the financial sector or for resource dependent sectors such as chemistry, transportation or communications, to name a few. Along with the economic and financial power comes political power – and often corruption. This situation makes any resistance or positive change extremely challenging. The race for control over natural resources is at full speed and the political and corporate elites have little appetite to give up their power and personal profits.