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“Need, Greed and a Sustainable Future – Charting a New Development Agenda”

My topic – “need, greed and a sustainable future” – derives from a remark made by Mahatma Gandhi that “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need but not every man’s greed.” In speaking on the relationship between need and greed today, I will examine in particular whether need and greed should be considered in separate terms. Environmental conservationists assert, as implied by Gandhi’s words, that need and greed are irreconcilable and that satisfying people’s needs is sufficient; going beyond that would deplete the Earth’s resources. However, I hold that need and greed should not be regarded separately because, in light of the circumstances of the international community at present, such a dichotomization cannot open the way to a sustainable future.

Need and greed are not necessarily incompatible. Perhaps a good example of this is Botswana, whose diamonds have saved many Batswana. Diamonds are not daily essentials, but the desire for diamonds in developed countries has led to development and progress for Botswana. The money obtained from diamonds has enabled the people of Botswana to receive free medical care and education. In other words, the greed of the developed countries has satisfied the need of a developing country. This organic relationship between need and greed can be seen elsewhere as well.

A new environmental conservation paradigm must be established to systematically build an organic relationship between need and greed. This paradigm must accept people’s greed and incorporate it in a fashion that also contributes to resource conservation. Building a new paradigm first requires the formulation of norms and systems for recompense. To go back to my earlier example, diamonds have made Botswana a success story but they have been a source of tragedy in Congo. The question is how best to meet the needs of people while extracting resources. The international community must put in place norms and systems to determine how to compensate societies and countries unable to secure sufficient profits from extracting resources.

Secondly, people’s livelihoods must be incorporated into the concept of sustainability. Calculating a “sustainable livelihood index” would be meaningful in this regard. Such an index would show not only if a given (secondary industry) product is sustainable from an environmental perspective but also where the product and its raw materials/inputs were sourced and produced and how beneficial the product is in

eliminating poverty in the country of origin/production. Nearly all of the indices produced by the United Nations and other organizations are compiled on a nation-by-nation basis, but the sustainable livelihood index would be a yardstick for specific products. An item produced in Germany and the same item produced in Mali, for instance, would differently impact the lives of people in the respective countries. The greater the beneficial impact of a product on a nation, the higher its index number would be.

Third, the concept of development must be reconsidered. Development tends to be regarded as the aim of a country's economic advancement, and development and wealth are often understood synonymously. This is not, however, a sustainable viewpoint. Raising the living standards of the entire world to, for example, the high living standards of the US is not feasible because Earth's resources are limited. Development should be understood as the maximization of people's health and options. Debates on the advisability of developmental assistance have touched on the contention that development assistance supports the recipient country's advancement but that what is truly needed is assistance for building people's capacity and securing their livelihoods. While it would not be prudent to suspend all existing developmental assistance, it is important to seek a balance between developmental assistance and assistance directed toward securing livelihoods (one opinion offered from the floor was that development assistance had thus far focused on bridging disparities in development levels between developed and developing countries, and that emphasis should be given in future to improving the skills of people in developing countries). By moving to implement the aforementioned, greed can satisfy people's needs.