

Darrell G. Moen, Ph.D.

Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

The Future of Progress: Reflections on Environment and Development

(1995: 30 minutes)

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Narrator: A small town near Stockholm in Sweden is the setting for an international conference on environment and development. The conference was organized jointly by the International Society for Ecology and Culture, the parent organization of the Ladakh Project, and Friends of the Earth - Sweden. Participants came from many different parts of the world, including Africa, India, Europe, North and South America, and Southeast Asia.

The meeting expressed the clear, common concern that conventional development, far from offering solutions to the world's problems, is in fact a major cause of social, economic, and environmental breakdown. A very different approach is necessary if we are to move towards truly sustainable patterns of living.

Helena Norberg-Hodge (International Society for Ecology and Culture):

Development is a broad, systemic transformation of society. In fact, it's a transformation that's still going on in the developed world, but there we call it progress and treat it like some sort of evolutionary force beyond our control. But, in fact, what is happening is that the interaction between a narrow economic paradigm and science and technology are creating a dynamic, and forcing culture and nature to adapt to the demands of technology and the economy.

It's a very frightening, escalating process because science is becoming ever more narrowly focused, ever more specialized, while the impact of technology is growing rapidly in both scale and over time. So, it's very important that we move beyond the perspective of the expert; an agricultural expert or a technical expert cannot and does not perceive the broad, systemic effect of the changes that they introduce. It's absolutely essential that we both broaden and deepen the debate of development.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): I think that discussions are even more important now because the development model which many of us feel is already

outmoded, is obsolete, impractical, and is in fact very, very dangerous for the survival of earth and the survival of humanity. This is something that many of the groups that we represent are increasingly aware of.

But, at the same time, the forces that are responsible for dominating the world and for perpetuating this kind of development, whilst we are all realizing that it can't go on for very much longer, maybe a few decades, the ones who are representing this kind of development have become stronger and stronger and want to create a situation in which they can not only continue with the plunder of natural resources, but they want to intensify and accelerate this process many times over.

Vandana Shiva (Chipko Movement): The Third World is sort of subjected to a war, a total war with probably more people turned destitute in their own homelands than any wars have ever accomplished. Within something like 40 years, we [in the Third World] are being pushed into industrializing at scales the North has never known. And it's needed for the North's business of capital accumulation. But every piece of mineral has to be turned into raw material for some industry, every piece of forest is needed for pulpwood, every piece of farmland is needed for agribusiness, and the people who make their living from those lands have to be pushed out.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): So now we have this cliché that poverty is the main cause of environmental problems. I'd like to defer. I think that the reverse is true. Affluence is the main cause of environmental problems, and environmental problems are becoming the major cause of poverty.

Vandana Shiva (Chipko Movement): The pressure on [natural] resources does not come from numbers, it comes from the killing of the relationship of nurturance communities have with their ecosystems. That's the single most important point at which [environmental] degradation starts. Distant industrialists have never had that level of nurturance. For them, everything has been a mine: you exploit it - you dump it. Local people have a possibility to have that relationship. But if you want to turn other peoples' commons into your commodities, the first thing that you have to do is kill that relationship of nurturance and belonging.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: The process of development is everywhere eroding both biological and cultural diversity. And they're inextricably linked. The reason we had diverse cultures around the world before was because they were cultures that were adapted to the diverse climates and ecosystems on which they depended. So we had a different type of architecture, different clothing, food, all of this because people were essentially basing their economy on the resources of their local area or the region.

What development is doing is training people to become dependent on industrial resources that are everywhere the same. So, in fact, what it's doing is introducing a

mono-culture everywhere, which means that people are being forced to compete for artificial scarcity, everyone competing for the same industrial resources.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): We have been taught to think that this is progress because we've been taught that all benefits are derived from the workings of the techno-sphere, this organization of matter that economic development builds up - the world of cement, you see. All benefits are man-made. Health is something where if you take enough pills and see enough doctors and go to enough hospitals, you're healthy. And it's like that for everything. Therefore, progress must mean maximizing man-made benefits. How do you do that?

By economic development. Now, the problem is that modern society is hooked on economic development. For example, we're hooked on building these massive dams because all the "people who matter" in our modern society, people in government service, big corporations, building organizations, development agencies, all benefit from building them. And it's like that with everything, it's not just dams. It's like that for nuclear power stations, for highway programs, for just about everything. We are hooked on the process that is destroying this planet, and if it goes on long enough, it's going to make our species extinct.

And I'm not talking about a few hundred years from now, I'm talking about a few decades from now. We interpret our problems in such a way as to make them appear amenable to the only solutions we can apply, which are those that involve further building, further development. You see, if people are sick, then the solution is to build more hospitals. You don't say, well, let's not pollute them, let's give them good food, let's let them take exercise. No, we need to build more hospitals, provide them with more pills, have more pharmaceutical companies. Whatever the problem is, you see, it's got to rationalize further development.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): So we have, on the one hand, the accelerating and continuous growth of the world economy, which in ecological terms means the greater and greater depletion of natural resources and the whole crisis of the environment which we are familiar with, and on the other hand, this growth, taking place in a very uneven, unfair manner, over-concentrated in the countries of the North and some parts of some cities in the South whose elites are also enjoying and taking part in this system whilst the large majority of humanity is going from bad to worse.

We must be prepared to accept the fact that for the very powerful people in the North, they are willing to go through all means possible to maintain their power and to strengthen their power even further. To many of us in the South, that was the lesson of the war which the United States fought against Iraq. The message of the United States is that the world's resources belong to the people in the North, even if some of these

resources "accidentally," due to geographical reasons, due probably to a mistake God has made, are located in the South.

This is the model of development which we are facing. On the political side, we have people who are willing to wage vicious military wars. On the economic side, we now have the Uruguay Round [of GATT] in which the multinationals want to have even more freedom to do whatever they want to do in any part of the world. And if you [a Third World country] try to regulate or stop them because you want to retain some economic sovereignty, that is considered to be against free trade and thus against international law.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): If you go back in history to the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 when we set up the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the GATT, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade set up four years later, it was part of a plan that explicitly stated that in order to prevent the recurrence of the type of economic depression that occurred in 1929 which eliminated economic development almost until the Second World War, it was necessary to bring the Third World within the orbit of our economic activities.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: To understand better what is going on with development, we can look at what's happening to the farmer. Everywhere in the world, the farmer is being systematically destroyed. In the industrialized world, we pulled more than 90% of the population, in many cases 98% of the population, away from agriculture. And now this is the model we are exporting to the Third World, where the majority of the people are still engaged in agriculture. In fact, what this means is that people are being pulled into ever-larger urban conglomerates.

This is still true in the North, that this centralizing, urbanizing trend is going on, but in the South, it's so much more obvious. The enormous cities, Jakarta, Mexico City, and so on, are not the consequence of overpopulation - that's adding to it, but they're direct consequences of policies that are urbanizing and destroying the small farmer.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): The first cause of starvation in the world is the export-led economy which we are foisting onto the Third World. When Third World countries borrow over and above their quota with the IMF, they have to sign IMF conditionalities. One of these conditionalities is that they reorient their economies towards exports, particularly the export of their food. They also have to undertake to mechanize their agriculture. So, they're forced to do two of the worst possible things they can do. First, they have to export their food. Most Third World countries today, up to 70% of the best agricultural land is used for export crops.

Now, how can you possibly feed people if you export their food? You either export it or you eat it, you can't do both. Now a lot of these Third World countries are starving

largely because all their food is being exported. Secondly, you've got to mechanize your agriculture, partly to meet IMF conditionalities, partly because the FAO [United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization] is pushing them to do that, partly because the agro-chemical industry is pushing them to buy their agro-chemicals, and the farm machinery companies are doing likewise. But once you start doing that, you have to have very large plantations because small farms can't afford all these inputs.

So, you're already using a means of production that is very destructive to the soil. So, you're not only exporting all the people's food, you're turning all the land into a desert. And if you use irrigated agriculture, what you don't turn into a conventional desert, you turn into a salt desert. Worse than that, you then push all of the people into the slums, because as I said earlier, small farmers can't afford to buy all the inputs so they're pushed off the land - into the slums. For example, India has 800 million people and 600 million live off the land.

If you adopt modern agriculture, that's what the [West's IMF and World Bank] want them to do, and you get farms of 500 acres and get 2% to 3% of the population producing the food for everybody else, you'll produce the food with 20 million people. What do you do with the other 580 million people? Shoot them? That would be the honest and most humane thing to do! But we won't, we'll push them into the slums [to suffer a protracted death from disease and malnutrition].

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Another impact of development is on people's self-esteem, how they feel about themselves and their own culture. For the last 17 years, I've worked in a place called Ladakh or Little Tibet, and I've seen firsthand the impact of development and modernization. In one of the first years I was there, I was in a particularly beautiful village. I asked a young man in the village to show me the poorest house. He thought for a bit and then he said, "We don't have any poor houses."

The same person I heard eight years later saying to a tourist, "Oh, if you could only help us Ladakhis, we're so poor." So, within eight years, his perception of himself and his own culture had changed so dramatically. What had happened in the intervening years is that the overall forces of modernization had, through tourism, through the media, through Western-style education, presented an ideal, urban, Western lifestyle, a lifestyle that seemed to be saying that you don't need to work and you can have infinite wealth. Suddenly, by contrast, his own culture and his own way of life seemed inferior, seemed poor, and even seemed stupid.

I've seen how this psychological impact is directly related to increasing friction between different ethnic and religious groups. In Ladakh, Buddhists and Muslims have been living side by side for 500 years peacefully, without ever any group conflict, and just within the last 17 years, as a direct consequence of these psychological pressures as

well as the urbanizing trends in which they are forced to compete for scarce jobs and scarce resources, violent friction between the two groups have resulted.

Vandana Shiva (Chipko Movement): One thing we face across the world is any kind of religious resurgence. It's happening in America, it's happening in the Middle East, it's happening everywhere. But the resurgence of Sikhism was really an outcome of the impact of the Green Revolution. Very clearly, very directly. Religious leaders that appeared in the 1980s were basically saying that the Green Revolution has destroyed our culture and destroyed our sense of moral values, our sense of what is right and wrong. It has made money the master of everything. No good society and no good community can live in this moral vacuum.

Therefore, we have to revise Sikhism to give direction to ourselves ethically. That's part of what the resurgence was about. Everyday, since about 1982, everyday 10 to 15 people are being killed in Punjab because of the total rupture of the systems of production. Total breakdown of community. Total individualization of the community. And 20 years later [after the introduction of the Green Revolution in Punjab], an erosion of the productivity base: erosion of the soils, desertification, soil deficiencies, pest outbreaks, absolute impossibilities for farmers to get enough returns on what they put in in terms of purchase of inputs like chemicals and seeds.

In Punjab the lessons are not being learned because no one is seeing the violence in Punjab as an outcome of that violent [socio-economic] transformation. People are seeing that as a problem arising from cultural diversity - Hindus and Sikhs can't live together! So, cultural diversity, which was not a problem before this technocratic violation, has turned into a problem and is treated as if it is the cause of the instabilities that are actually products of a different transformation.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Another problem with development is their fixation on narrow economic criteria and on GNP. What this means is that a traditional subsistence economy in which people have everything they need such as food, clothing, and shelter, is simply not recognized. It's a problem in the developed world as well, but it's much clearer, one can really see how crazy these economic criteria are when one looks at the situation of traditional farmers. They might have hundreds of animals, lots of fields, plenty to eat, large houses, and yet all of this is considered zero, it's not even recognized.

And that means that you're not distinguishing between someone who lives in New York who doesn't have money and a farmer in the developing world who doesn't have money. It makes a complete joke of the whole process because it means that you can pull people away from village life where they have plenty to eat and everything they need into an urban slum where, if they earn half a dollar a day, it's [considered] progress because everything they had before is considered nothing.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): Their whole way of accounting is just farcical, it's utterly farcical! Modern economics has to be rewritten from scratch. It's based on totally false assumptions. The assumption that wealth is man-made material goods such as electric toothbrushes, plastic buckets, plastic Mickey Mouses, and things of this sort. And that everything [natural] must be destroyed to provide that. The assumption is false, completely false.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): The modern technological system has so destroyed the world that it is not only the biosphere that is affected, the atmosphere, the water systems, the land, and so on, but even our own human bodies are being mutated. Not only in terms of the cancer cells that are developing in our bodies, but the very nature of the human gene is changing because of the amount of chemicals and poisons and so on which we are eating and breathing in [and being exposed to in various ways].

Vandana Shiva (Chipko Movement): It's very serious. If you think of how industrialization of 200 years ago based on fossil fuels is causing the greenhouse effect of today, if you think of industrial agriculture of 20 years ago that has totally destituted our soil and our water systems, it's very serious. But something far more serious is happening today in the 1990s. That is that the past industrializations are nothing compared to the new [form of] industrialization planned to keep the economic system going because the last colonies will be inhabited and enclosed in this.

Land has been colonized, water has been colonized, forests have been colonized, and the "last colonies," really the only colonies left, are living systems: living plants, animals, and women's bodies. And those are the sites of new investment through the new bio-technologies. The United States already has laws and [legal] decisions that allow the ownership of life through changes in patent law. And the European community [as well as Japan] are following up in that [direction].

This is basically [thought to be] needed because if plants can grow on their own, if my seed from this year can give me food for next year, how does capital make money? Given that life itself is having to be redefined to make the next phase of industrialization possible, if they have their way, the deadening of our minds will be much faster than the deadening of this planet. And if that happens, there's no recovery.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): If you look at the situation today, 20% of the world's population living in the North are consuming 80% of the world's resources because they have 80% of the world's income, every year. The only way in which we can reduce the environmental crisis and eventually stop it, hopefully, is for this wasteful consumption to be reduced and forced to come to a stop. In other words, the kind of lifestyle which you are having in Northern "civilization," I don't say "Western" civilization because there are parts of the North which may not be Western, this kind of

lifestyle has to change very drastically. We have to reduce the level of consumption overall, but reduce it in such a way that the poor people do not bear the brunt of this adjustment.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): We've got to get back to small communities, we've got to make sure that economic activities are conducted within these communities on a very much smaller scale and catering for a very much smaller market. A "free market" if you like, but a free market on a very much smaller scale - the village market or, if you like, a regional market. We've got to reduce the scale of these activities in order to reduce very, very drastically indeed, the impact of all our activities on the environment which cannot support this [large-scale] impact anymore.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: We need to look at transport policies and agricultural policies side by side. And if we do that, we'll see that we're distancing producers and consumers ever further, and it's not in our interest. It means we're getting poorer quality food and we're actually subsidizing transport which is greatly increasing pollution. We need to directly reverse this trend, to shorten the distance between producers and consumers.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): I can provide you with mountains of evidence to show that the small farm is very much more productive than the big one. There's no comparison. If you're measuring food [production] per acre, which is what is important, the small farmer produces very much more food. It's done with very much more care. There's an Indian farmer at this meeting, and he has a 25 acre farm with 35 families living off this farm. You wouldn't think this possible. The amount of food that they produce is astonishing.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: In order to understand what's going on with development, it's very important that we look at the basic infrastructure that every government agency and all the bilateral [and multilateral] agencies are introducing. They consist of large, centralized energy installations, an ever-expanding transport infrastructure, mass communication, and Western-style education. And the Western-style education is something that is rarely discussed or criticized. I'm not at all saying that I'm not in favor of education, but we have to look very carefully at what's going on with this type of schooling.

Because, in fact, what's happening is that children are essentially being put into a "box" as they are maturing and growing up, and in this "box" they receive no information about their local context. They learn nothing about the resources on which their ancestors depended for generations. They're being trained to become urban, specialized consumers, and will literally sit on the Tibetan plateau or in Bali reading a bad translation of Homer's Iliad. Most importantly, they learn nothing about the economic

context which would make them independent and able to survive in their own environment.

Edward Goldsmith (Ecologist magazine): Modern knowledge serves, above all, to legitimize the modern policies of economic development. We need to educate people in a very different way. We need to rewrite these subjects. [In modern education], you can't see that polluting the world is very [dangerous], you can't see that cutting down forests [is suicidal], you still believe that economic progress is what really matters and these environmental concerns don't matter, they're just small side-effects [compared to "progress"]. When you see the whole picture, you see that you can no longer sustain that argument. Suddenly, everything sort of falls into place like a great jigsaw puzzle. So, in effect, [with a different type of education], you do have sort of conversion. You have what Kuhn calls a "paradigmatic shift" but on the level of a society's whole worldview.

Vandana Shiva (Chipko Movement): To me, the ecological message really is the recognition that we can never predict what the implications of our tampering with natural and social systems are. We know so little about these systems and the best way to act is in very tiny, hesitant steps to make sure that what we do is actually strengthening the system rather than eroding it.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Since the impact of what we call "progress" in the North and "development" in the South is so disastrous, both on the environment and on culture, on people's sense of self and their sense of self-esteem, we urgently need what I call "counter-development." Counter-development would be a massive education campaign to spell out the links and to show why we radically have to turn away from this capital-intensive, energy-intensive, centralizing direction. And it needs to happen now. It's an action plan - education now is the most urgent action.

We also need to support a decentralized development path which will be based on real respect for biological and cultural diversity. This will mean much less money. We need to turn away from the capital-intensive, large-scale installations towards small-scale, appropriate technologies based on renewable energy. They cost a fraction in financial terms and, more importantly, in cultural and environmental terms. This decentralized development path would support real community - feeling connected to the people where you live. It would be supporting location-specific knowledge and strengthening and diversifying local economies.

And all of this would serve to greatly increase the power and status of women. So, what we need right now is a massive education campaign and a rapid turnaround to support real progress: progress based on people and nature.

Martin Khor (Third World Network): As long as a glimmer of hope exists, then I think that we can keep on fighting. This glimmer of hope exists because, increasingly, more and more people, especially the younger people, are realizing that there is something wrong with [the present] system, what it is that is wrong with the system, and what the solutions are in the long run. And they are beginning to fight. They are beginning to become more "green."

They are beginning to reject the assumptions that underpin this whole system. They are beginning to have visions of a different kind of world and a different kind of system within which we can be more in harmony with fellow human beings and also with nature.