

DIFFERENT PATHS TO JUSTICE: The Case of Economy and The Environment

This article sums up discussions by team members of a joint project between Greenpeace MENA and the Arab Forum for Alternatives entitled “Environment and Social Justice in the Arab region.”

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* The article only reflects the views of participants.

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There has lately been a pressing need for elaborate discussion on the possibility of creating an economy based on the common good, one that takes into consideration environmental sustainability and the detrimental effects of climate change. The Arab region is known for its climatic diversity, which was reflected on the variety of repercussions linked to climate change. These include rising temperatures, draught, floods, a decline in agricultural production, and the deterioration of the tourism sector.

Climate change is an urgent issue that cannot be addressed solely through long-term plans since, like Covid-19, its impact is manifested in almost all aspects of life. This impact is not the same across the globe, which also applies to Covid-19 that affected particular regions more than others and hit marginalized and fragile groups much harder. Similarly, climate change has a more damaging impact on the Arab region, which necessitates immediate intervention through formulating a new approach to be utilized in dealing with the crisis and addressing major questions related to its impacts. Environmental movements, and in some cases politicians and political parties, have already started exploring different channels to deal with climate change.

Linking the environment to the current economic system is extremely relevant to the issue of climate change. The current economic system is almost entirely based on market powers. Consequently, the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) became the topmost priority regardless of the broader needs of communities and individuals. The main characteristics of this system have a substantial impact, both direct and indirect, on the environment since radical globalization is based on the exploitation of human and natural resources in the Global South. This is made possible through free trade agreements, violations committed by corporates, and not taking into consideration climate change, the decline of biodiversity, and other environmental disasters. This situation places the world on the verge of climate chaos that is bound to have detrimental effects on the entire planet. Other factors make the current situation more complicated, including the dominance of funding institutions on the economy and the effect of industrialization on nature. There are several examples in the Arab region that underline the impact of the current economic system on the environment. This is demonstrated in the case of the Bisri Dam project in Lebanon. The dam was expected to destroy around six million square meters of farmland and 70 historical landmarks and the Bisri Valley is the second most important habitat for migratory birds in

Lebanon. When the Lebanese government decided to start the project, neither the report on environmental impacts nor the ecological compensation plan had been finalized. The Bisri Valley, part of which is owned by the state, could be utilized towards achieving food security for the Lebanese people since it can cover 60% of their needs of strawberry and 50% of their needs of broad beans, to cite a few examples. This puts into question the government's ability to invest in natural resources in a way that serves the common good.

It is important to stress the close link between economic and environmental systems, hence the importance of addressing both together and introducing a substantial change to the current approach to each. This can be done through adopting "green recovery" plans, acquiring an understanding of environmental sustainability, and countering hyper-consumerism and its impact on the environment. Environmental deterioration affects the issue of social justice since through excessive encroachment on nature, the promotion of privatization and globalization, and the prioritization of economic growth, the current economic system continues to undermine the principle of equality through allowing the concentration of money and influence in the hands of the minority while marginalizing more segments of society, hence increasing exclusion and impoverishment. That is why it is important to adopt an economy that gives precedence to people and the environment over short-term economic interests, that makes protecting the ecosystem a priority, and that is not solely based on profit and growth. This economy needs to be sustainable in itself, which becomes possible through using renewable energy, minimizing chemicals and eliminating toxic waste, and recycling.

The main question posed by this project is as follows: Is there a contradiction between economy and the environment? This question leads to another important one that pertains to the Arab region, where economic growth and environmental protection are, in fact, contradictory: Is it possible to

use the same criteria of economic growth in a developed country like Sweden in a country like Egypt, which is totally different in terms of industrial development and income levels? Because the Arab region is different from developed parts of the worlds, environmental issues need to be addressed through the reality in which its citizens live. In different parts of the world, a link is established between economic procedures required to achieve equality, including public services, tax reforms, and universal basic income, and making the environment a priority and a main component of the policy-making process. This means changing the criteria through which economic activity is measured so that it goes beyond the GDP and adopting a discourse that reflects this change and that becomes part of a broader one which covers the Global South. This, however, would not be feasible without local bases in each country to design policies and follow up on implementation.

Another question becomes relevant: Can new technologies allow for economic growth in a way that achieves social justice for people while not disrupting the environment? This is possible provided that consumption and extraction do not remain the main objectives and are replaced by the necessity of improving citizens' living standards across the board. In order for this transformation to materialize, adopting approaches that render economy and the environment complementary rather than contradictory becomes a must. However, technology is not the magical answer to this crisis as is promoted by several entities, especially international financial institutions, since technological solutions do not necessarily favor an alternative pattern. In fact, a form of "green grabbing" can take place, which means the appropriation of resources for environmental purposes. That is why examining the potential of technological solutions should include bearing in mind how capable the capitalist system is of reformulating environmental approaches so that they end up serving the current exploitative pattern.

The solar energy project in Benban, a village in the south of Egypt, is a case in point. The project, which will result in the construction of Africa's largest solar energy power plant and is mainly implemented by foreign entities, is totally detached from the needs and reality of local communities. It is known who the beneficiaries of generated solar energy would be and the state took hold of several lands from Benban and other neighboring villages, which resulted in several disputes that were not covered by the media. Eventually, locals and the state reached an agreement in which the former are to be exclusively offered menial jobs, as guards, drivers... etc., in the project and a technical school that teaches solar energy is established in the area. While the latter seems like a good development, locals are still fully excluded since not only do they not benefit from the energy generated by the plant, but are also unaware of the project, which is three kilometers away, to start with. Therefore, the Benban project constitutes a form of importing technology that mainly serves the interests of multinationals. While the generation of solar energy and the use of clean energy are in themselves positive steps towards protecting the environment, those steps are taken without involving the people or using the project to develop the skills of locals and improve their standards of living.

Several other projects in the region have the same problem such as the Ouarzazate Solar Power Station in Morocco. What is common between those projects is the fact that they are part of the "green capitalism" discourse, in which environmental causes are used as a pretext for exploitation and appropriation of land and resources at the expense of local communities. That is why it is not possible to think of a discourse that is both green and fair without looking into the creation of an alternative system that counters the impacts of capitalism. Such discourse cannot exclude relations between the North and the South in which the balance of power consolidate the dominance of the first while overlooking the needs of citizens and local specificities in the second.

All of the above highlights the necessity of adopting an economic discourse that is more aware of the threats faced by the entire planet and that is based on justice, transparency, and democratic principles. This can be done through different mechanisms such as legislations that criminalize violations against the environment and public property. Added to this is creating a new tax system that does not include exemptions with potential harm to the environment and that shifts the burden from workers and civil servants to accumulators of wealth who also consume the highest percentage of energy and resources and whose businesses overlook environmental violations. Such system should also apply to financial transactions and biddings that have a negative impact on the environment and public property. Political systems and state institutions are to be restructured so that they become less hierarchical and more participatory, operate in accordance with democratic principles that include transparency, the right to information, and rotation of power, and adopt a decentralized approach to the distribution of food and energy.

In Tunisia, the quest for an alternative approach gained momentum after the ruling clique failed to provide answers for major social and economic questions. In the past few years, the number of protest movements that call for environmental justice has witnessed a remarkable increase. Several solutions were proposed by these movements, including the introduction of alternative systems in several fields including production, agricultural marketing, and traditional crafts. The Tunisian case offers an example in which people reformulate the existing system away from political entities, none of which is adopting an alternative discourse. While it is still possible to attempt such a change from within state institutions, which also discuss environmental issues and emission reduction, it becomes clear in the Tunisian case that real change start from the community. The same applies to raising awareness about pressing issues and looking into the possibility of

changing the policy-making process. Civil society plays a major role in effecting such change as long as it addresses the reality of the context in which it operates and adopts a hands-on approach. Regarding contradictions in the Arab region, it is extremely necessary to address the gap between the Gulf region and other Arab countries as far as the adoption of “green energy” is concerned. Economy in the Gulf region basically depends on nonrenewable energy such as oil and different oil-related industries. This is not the case in other Arab countries, especially those with an agricultural history and where consumption patterns are linked to agricultural economy.

North-South relations remain an important component in any plan to adopt an alternative discourse, particularly in the Arab region where colonial history still shapes those relations, especially on the geopolitical level. This is demonstrated in the prevalent pattern of “extractive economy,” which includes industries, institutions, and funds related to the globalized extraction of natural resources. Such pattern involves the extraction of mineral and fossil fuels and applies to large-scale, unilateral projects in agriculture, forests, and fishing. This, in turn, brings back to the forefront the question of why the achievement of development and the protection of the environment might seem contradictory.