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The trouble with sustainability

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I t is all too common for discussions on sustainability to focus entirely on how to make our resource consumption more efficient, and very little on how people can work and earn a living without destroying the world. While resource productivity is understandably at the center of every plan for sustainability, critical issues surrounding employment are surprisingly overlooked by a number of sustainability analysts, particularly in the West.

The latest Living Planet Report from WWF International shows that the global ecological footprint -- humanity's use of natural resources measured in land and sea area needed to renew them -- already exceeds Earth's capacity by 20 percent. Among the solutions recommended by the report are more efficient technologies for providing goods and services. The fact that the report suggests nothing about work and employment -- and the technologies needed to enable them -- simply highlights the huge divide between environmental sustainability and social sustainability in current thinking.

When the ongoing depletion of natural capital is juxtaposed with all the unemployment and underemployment around the world -- nearly 750 million unemployed or working poor; another 500 million workers expected to enter the labor markets by 2015 -- it is difficult to see how either of the problems could be solved without considering the other. Lifting people out of poverty depends critically on the availability of meaningful work to anyone willing to work. Conserving resources, and using them at sustainable rates, depends in part on how we produce our goods and services. The two are intricately connected.

If we are going to pursue technologies for resource productivity, we at least need to ask how these technologies would impact work and employment. Would they help create jobs at all skill levels? Or, would they create a few jobs requiring special skills and education, but eliminate many lower-level jobs? If jobs are eliminated, what else could the unemployed workers do to support themselves that would also be sustainable?

The harsh reality is that those who are not part of the production process can't hope to take part in the consumption of goods and services, no matter how efficient the production. Two years ago, there were widely publicized news

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reports that India -- following its rapid advances in agriculture -- had more than 50 million tons of surplus wheat rotting in government warehouses. But the poor, including about 350 million Indians who suffer from hunger, had no way of getting any of this food. The problem was simply a lack of purchasing power on the part of the poor, a direct consequence of unemployment and underemployment.

Since rural populations far exceed urban populations in most developing nations, agriculture is one of the testing grounds where the issue of sustainability will have to be settled. As more food is grown per acre through intensive farming practices based on mechanization and chemical inputs, the productivity of land increases but requires fewer workers.

Genetic engineering goes a step further in the automation of food production by inserting desired properties into crops, such as pest resistance and drought tolerance. Lower water use and reduced dependence on chemical inputs imply higher resource productivity, although with some long-term risk to the environment. To the extent that genetically modified crops enable uniform monocultures and large-scale farming, they continue the trend of fewer jobs for farm workers.

Small-scale farms that use the best organic farming methods and limited mechanization could potentially increase both resource productivity and employment. If these farms distribute their products mostly in their local areas, they would also significantly reduce resources used in transportation. But in a world that is rapidly moving toward mass production of food in large-scale farms and distribution through global trade, there is considerable challenge in returning to business models that are small-scale and local.

High resource productivity is clearly a necessary condition for sustainability, but not sufficient by itself. If we become very efficient at using natural resources, but can't find a way to gainfully employ a billion of our fellow citizens, we may well find that a sustainable future is still not within reach.

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