

FORGET 'DEVELOPING' POOR COUNTRIES, IT'S TIME TO 'DEVELOP' RICH COUNTRIES

This week, heads of state are gathering in New York to sign the UN's new sustainable development goals. The main objective is to eradicate poverty by 2030. It's set to be a monumental international celebration. [...] But beneath all the hype, it's business as usual. The main strategy for eradicating poverty is the same: growth.

Growth has been the main object of development for the past 70 years, despite the fact that it's not working. Since 1980, the global economy has grown by 380%, but the number of people living in poverty on less than \$5 a day has increased by more than 1.1 billion. That's 17 times the population of Britain. So much for the trickle-down effect.

Orthodox economists insist that all we need is yet more growth. More progressive types tell us that we need to shift some of the yields of growth from the richer segments of the population to the poorer ones, evening things out a bit. Neither approach is adequate. Why? Because even at current levels of average global consumption, we're overshooting our planet's bio-capacity by more than 50% each year.

In other words, growth isn't an option any more – we've already grown too much. [...]. And the hard truth is that this global crisis is due almost entirely to overconsumption in rich countries. Instead of pushing poor countries to 'catch up' with rich ones, we should be getting rich countries to 'catch down' [...] to more appropriate levels of development. We should look at societies where people live long and happy lives at relatively low levels of income and consumption not as basket cases that need to be developed towards western models, but as exemplars of efficient living.

How much do we really need to live long and happy lives? In the US, life expectancy is 79 years and GDP per capita is \$53,000. But many countries have achieved similar life expectancy with a mere fraction of this income. Cuba has a comparable life expectancy to the US and one of the highest literacy rates in the world with GDP per capita of only \$6,000. Similar claims can be made of Peru, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Tunisia. [...] And even if we look at measures of overall happiness and wellbeing in addition to life expectancy, a number of low and middle income countries rank highly. Costa Rica manages to sustain one of the highest happiness indicators and life expectancies in the world with a per capita income one-fourth that of the US.

In light of this, perhaps we should regard such countries not as underdeveloped, but rather as appropriately developed. And maybe we need to start calling on rich countries to justify their excesses.