

Introduction

A region in danger !

Justice between environmental
and economic aspects



Introduction¹:

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 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 that deals 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 through which the effects of climate change can be mitigated.

Linking the environment to the global economic system, in which the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) became the topmost priority regardless of the broader needs of communities and individuals, is extremely relevant to the issue of climate change. 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 and environmental violations committed by corporations, which in turn lead to the decline of biodiversity and the depletion of resources. 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 hegemony of international financial institutions 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 play a major role in 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.

¹ This introduction is the outcome of discussions held during the project's preparatory session and is drafted by Zainab Sorour, assistant researcher at the Arab Forum for Alternatives.

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 upon 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 few 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 the adoption of sustainable practices that include shifting to renewable sources of energy, eliminating toxic waste, and minimizing waste.

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 world, 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 efforts in each country to lobby for policy changes and follow up on implementation.

Another question becomes relevant: Can new technologies allow for economic growth in a way that achieves social justice while not disrupting the environment? This is possible provided that consumption and extraction do not remain the main objectives and are replaced by the prioritization 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, as 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 rather than reforming it.

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. This because local communities are not the beneficiaries of generated solar energy 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 many of them were 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 must tackle the relations between the North and the South in which the balance of power consolidates the dominance of the former while overlooking the needs of citizens and local specificities in the latter.

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. This should be accompanied by the creation a new tax system that does

not offer exemptions for projects that can potentially harm 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 concerns. Such a 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 address major social and economic problems. In the past few years, protest movements that call for environmental justice increased remarkably. 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 reformulated the existing system away from political entities, which are not adopting an alternative discourse. While it is still possible to attempt such a change from within state institutions, many of which deal with environmental issues, it becomes clear in the Tunisian case that real change starts 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 more 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 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.

Because the relationship between climate justice and social justice is multifaceted, it is important to examine the different angles that tie the two of them together and this is the purpose of this study. Papers in this book focus on six of the most pertinent aspects that underline that relationship: water, industrial development, biodiversity, urban planning, energy sovereignty, and food sovereignty.