

# **1. THE PARADOXICAL CHARACTER OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN DEVELOPING AND DEVELOPED TOWNS, IN PARTICULAR SOWETO**

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## **5. ABSTRACT**

If one considers the growing international environmental awareness, one cannot help but notice the relative lack of attention accorded urban environments of poverty. A research and policy vacuum is also present in cities such as Soweto. While in developed countries there is a sound understanding of the relationship between people and their environment and how this affects, and is affected by economic and political institutions, this relationship enjoys very little attention in developing countries. This paradox needs to be researched to enable developing urban areas to address their many environmental problems. Although it is often stated that human capital is the most important resource, this resource often remains under-utilised owing to the high incidence of unemployment among unskilled and poor workers (Mears 1998:256).

The objective of this paper is to obtain a better understanding of how environmental change can be used to create employment and a better quality of life for the poor in developing cities.

Environmental and natural resource economics include among its concerns natural vegetation, land use, the development of natural resources, energy, improving air quality, urban development and environmental modification, the coastal and other waters, property rights and the population problem, to name only a few (Tietenberg 1996; Perman, Ma & McGilvray 1997; Gupta & Asher 1998). The aim of this research is to investigate possible ways of changing some of these environmental aspects with a view to improving economic development in Soweto and other

developing cities. In view of current conditions in Soweto, one can justifiably say that this city can improve its environmental management on all fronts.

This paper forms part of an ongoing research project concerned with environmental management and employment creation in developing urban areas. The hypothesis postulated in this paper is that developed economies are in a better position than developing countries to achieve sustainable economic development. This is mainly because they adopt a more integrated development approach which includes the environment. Moreover, in this context the national, provincial and local governments, as well as multinational agencies and NGOs, can play a significant role in facilitating and financing effective environmental change. In other words, Soweto can learn from the experiences of others, but will need significant support to effect environmental change.

The following example shows that the idea of learning from the experiences of developed countries is not as far-fetched as it might seem. The environmental problems faced by North American cities are remarkably similar to those faced by cities in the developing world. Poor people, and especially Americans belonging to the poor minority, are becoming increasingly concentrated in inner cities and isolated communities, which have become dumping grounds for the wastes of other communities (Serageldin & Cohen 1995:6). This concentration, mainly in the inner cities, is accompanied by unemployment, increased and prolonged welfare dependency, public health problems and, most visibly, an increase in criminal activities. Unemployment rates in some inner-city areas are typically 50% or higher (Miller 1998:315). This bears a striking resemblance to conditions in developing cities, where the majority of inhabitants are affected.

The aspects analysed in this paper are demarcated as follows. Section 2 states the nature of the environmental problems and how they are experienced in developing cities. The scope of this topic is so wide that only a few aspects can be touched upon. Sections 3 and 4 describe two of the main problems encountered by those attempting to promote economic development, and in Section 5 the environmental changes that may be implemented to improve economic development in Soweto are discussed. Because of the extremely complex nature of many of these aspects, many arguments both in favour of and against environmental change in economic development can be offered. This paper gives only one perception of the very complex problem which will be discussed below.