Conclusion: Renewing Dependence

# 7.1 Primacy of development

The sustainability of the environment goes hand in hand with the sustainability of human society. At one end of the continuum, radical environmentalists may support population control to preserve the climate, but this solution is far from adequate. I take the position that, while climate action is important, we should seek some sort of compromise to secure the right to development for human society, particularly for those who are considered “latecomers” in the Global South. Yet the intensifying crisis in climate and environment and its significant risk to all societies forces us to rethink what we mean when we speak of “development” and how this reassessment changes our conception of what needs to be done.

Since the Second World War, development has primarily been viewed as the increase in economic activities intended to result in the growth of per capita income and GDP (Coyle 2015). States that are structured to promote such development through explicit regulatory and public investment policies are called “developmental states,” a characteristic feature of East Asian nations in particular (Johnson 1982; Bresser-Pereira 2019). Currently, the transformation from developmental states to environmental states is taking place at exceptional speed among less-developed countries, particularly in Asia, where global emissions of CO2 are increasing at the fastest rate (Global Carbon Project 2023). As discussed in the previous chapter, the absorptive capacity of locally based intermediary organizations is not keeping pace with neverending “development” in these countries.

Economic development has the effect of shortening the times and distances associated with all manner of economic activities through new technologies and the re-orientation of people toward greater competition in society. It also has a way of turning environmental measures into just another aspect of development. Building resilient infrastructure to adapt to climate change is one prominent example. In practice, conservation is incorporated into existing means of development. As such, developing countries are not always putting conservation on the back burner, but developmental and environmental policies are often two sides of the same coin.

The primacy of “development” is so deeply ingrained in modern societies that development becomes positioned as a solution to all social ills, rarely seen as a *problem* in its own right. We must ask what has been lost in the pursuit of increased individual freedom and economic wealth. When hastily implemented environmental policies fail to produce the desired results, governments of developing countries—often with support from foreign donors—launch new “plans” while failed policies are quietly incorporated into the regulatory system. As long as this developmental state framework continues to dominate, the vicious cycle that leads to inversion will continue. Environmental policies are also often stymied by policy misalignment. To give one obvious example, many countries are still subsidizing fossil fuels, inhibiting even level competition with more renewable alternative sources, all while struggling to regulate the resulting CO2 emissions (Black et al. 2023).

So long as we present economic development and capitalistic competition as the solution to our existing problems, we maintain the risk of perpetuating the same structures that produced these problems in the first place. Development simply keeps powering ahead. Many policies are proposed based on specific calculations drawing from and reinforcing the development mindset. Do we have the tools to implement this policy? Do we have the budget? Will it be politically advantageous? Like clockwork, these calculations produce measures that recreate and exacerbate rather than solve problems.

The overarching question, therefore, is how we can untangle ourselves from this ever-expanding web of development that leads to inversion. As we begin to understand the problem of inversion, I suggest efforts to create and implement policies that are explicitly designed to avoid causing more problems. If the developmental state continuously searches for what the country is “missing” and attempts to plug any identified gaps with more development, we need to reconsider development itself *before* we try to address the environment. The approach that I propose is rooted in this shift in perspective. It involves reflecting on the past and making the most of what we already have. It is certainly tempting to focus on deficiencies and shortages. However, this human tendency is precisely the blind spot exploited by external forces who come bearing “solutions” (Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). Considering the ways that inversion problematizes the solution brings us back to how problems emerge to begin with. Yet solutions within the scope of environmental policy are limited by definition. So what are the options?

# 7.2 Preventing Inversion

The emergence of environmental states is inevitable given the rise of climate and other environmental threats requiring public response. These can function to prevent the inversion created by their own policies. One is to ensure that people who live in or near the affected areas are treated as primary stakeholders and given the power to take the initiative in the direction of policies. In other words, development itself needs to become decentralized to make room for localized solutions. When projects happen on a local scale, regions are much better positioned to mitigate against nascent inversion. Consider projects that provide electricity to rural areas in developing countries by installing solar technology rather than constructing vast dams. Here, development is scaled down to become manageable by local people.

A second way to fend off inversion is to break down bureaucratic silos and integrate conservation into development policies. For emergent nations, this is not simply improving how environmental projects are run. As highlighted in Chapter 2, the administrative bodies behind development and environmental initiatives are often at loggerheads. Environmental bodies are responsible for regulating other government agencies but often lack the power to impose their authority. The question then becomes how conservation mechanisms can be effectively incorporated into existing administrative bodies in charge of development.

A third way to mitigate inversion is to clear the way for intermediary organizations to respond and adapt to changes brought about by societal, technological or climate change while avoiding the exasperation caused by solutionist policies. Inversion happens when local communities lack the strength to cope with external changes or shocks. As demonstrated when Japan was experiencing severe industrial pollution in the 1960s and 70s, locals pushed back against external pressure from scientific or political actors. This forced policymakers to understand their impact on those harmed by top-down environmental policies. There may be little outsiders can do to build the intermediaries needed for such an approach to succeed, but where such groups arise, they should be preserved and supported rather than interfered with or controlled by the state.

Environmental states will only learn and self-correct through external pressure applied as a result of the need for transparency and disclosure of information. Conversely, when environmental states veer out of control, the cause is often opaque policy implementation processes that result in an information vacuum. If people never hear about what happens on lands under the direct control of the state, they cannot criticize these activities or offer solutions. A more serious problem is that even when information is available, no one bothers to debate it publicly. Journalists and researchers have an important responsibility here. There is often significant misalignment between the issues that states declare support for and throw money at and the hidden effects of these government initiatives. Otherwise, the voices of the most vulnerable cannot be heard, and policymakers will fail to learn from those most affected by environmental policies. This study began by examining this gap between the overt objectives of policies and their consequences.

This book has considered the ground-level socio-political consequences of the environmental policies prevalent under the current system. It argues that there needs to be a mechanism to reconnect ground-level events to the policymaking process and eventually improve the quality of our natural environment with fewer incidences of inversion. Our key challenges are accepting uncertainty as a given and maintaining robust processes for applying pressure to correct inevitable mistakes. We need to foster people’s ability to create pressure and wield it appropriately.

# 7.3 Can we “Govern” the Environment?

An incredibly wide array of stakeholders with different interests is involved in efforts to find solutions to environmental problems. This has inspired a global push to somehow unite these actors behind a common goal, which led to the emergence of “environmental governance” in the 1990s (Lamont 1996). The idea behind this concept is that the environment should be managed along democratic principles formulated and supported through interactions between governments, companies, and civil society. In other words, the essence of governance is “integration between rule from above and rule from below” (Matsushita 2007, xx). Generally, scholars of governance highlight the key finding that states have traditionally held a monopoly on environmental management. Conversely, environmental governance seeks ways for nongovernment actors to also obtain real power so that strong networks supporting conservation can emerge—in short, their focus is on improving the means available for environmental management (Bodin 2017).

Theories of environmental governance tend to focus on the structure of governance systems rather than the effects of strict conservation on local communities (Bodin 2017). However, not everyone is equally affected by environmental problems, just as not everyone is affected equally by the “solutions.” Consider the example of natural disasters. They may appear to affect everyone in a particular location equally, but people’s ability to cope in disaster situations is determined largely by factors such as the quality of their housing and the depth of their pockets. Subsequent aid and adaptation measures create certain divergences depending on the diversity of conditions of the locals. When we focus solely on improving our means of dealing with threats to/from the natural environment, we risk entrenching existing disparities between people. As discussed in Chapter 2, states using their power to restrict poor people’s access to natural resources often perpetuate inequality. Environmental policies are certainly political both before and after their implementation. The environmental state concept attempts to capture a wide spectrum of consequences rather than being preoccupied with evaluating individual policies.

Theories of environmental governance place the highest importance on decision-making, while the environmental state theory emphasizes the consequences of such decisions, crucially revealing what environmental policies do to people. This difference is significant. When policies are explicitly designed to affect society, it is essential to closely scrutinize their effects on local communities. Welfare, education, and health-related policies are prime examples. The causal relationships between environmental policies and societal changes are less clear-cut or visible, making them much less likely candidates for public debate. The effectiveness of environmental policies is usually measured by their impact on environmental quality, not their impact on people.

This book has highlighted that it is both difficult and crucial to pinpoint when a country evolved into an environmental state. Yet, it is of paramount importance to remember that environmental states do not spring from nothing—they are built on whatever structures are already in place.

Table 7.1 How developmental states become environmental states

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **<—Developmental state—> <—Environmental state—>** | | |
| **Interventions**  **Resources** | **Production**  **(use is encouraged)** | **Conservation**  **(use is moderated)** | **Protection**  **(use is forbidden)** |
| **Farmland** | Private lands/land reclamation | Zoning | Enclosure by state |
| **Forests** | Deforestation | Sustainable yield through cycles of harvest and plantations | Establishment of protected areas |
| **Water** | Irrigation, transportation, power generation | Usage limits, water management, improvement of water quality | Protection of water sources |
| **Minerals** | Mining | Licensing of mining rights | Shift to renewable resources |

Source: By the author.

As Table 7.1 shows, when developmental states transform into environmental states, the targets of government interventions shift as well. The focus of the state gradually moves from distant resources to those more closely entwined with ordinary people’s daily lives. Policy initiatives shift from production (use is encouraged) to conservation (use is moderated) and protection (use is prohibited). Throughout this process, policies become increasingly specialized and exclusionary, concentrating power in the hands of the experts and the state. When we consider this evolution over time, we find inherent tendencies that push policies in one direction or the other without anyone involved being particularly aware of the consequences to the people affected.

There is a significant overlap between developmental states and environmental states. All countries are in a transitional phase from one to the other. Sometimes we can draw a clear line between these two stages at the point where countries start prioritizing nature and sustainability in their planning before establishing the systems needed to implement these plans. However, stated intentions and plans rarely reflect the actual extent of state influence. There is only one way to identify an environmental state, and that is by looking at the changes affecting people on the ground. Such impacts can vary greatly at different times and in different places, further complicating efforts to objectively define and identify environmental states.

Once we begin investigating the problem-solving methods a country relies on as a developmental state, conventional theories of environmental governance are no longer helpful. If we limit our analysis to conservation-related government agencies and other clear measures that states take, we will never find our way to the heart of the problem. Consider the example of climate change, where states seem to prefer adaptation over mitigation. Countries like to develop new technologies and build new infrastructure—from breakwaters to highly sophisticated water management systems. These measures are logical from a development perspective because they also create jobs. However, they do little to combat the root cause of global warming, namely rising CO2 levels (Keohane 2015).

Time after time, states determine that something is lacking or ineffectual in a particular area, bring in non-local expertise to address the problem, and trigger the inversion of their natural resources and environmental policies. Time and again, states attempt to implement environmental policies without realizing that they are operating within the mindset of a developmental state. In developing countries, the shift from development to conservation often occurs very rapidly. No analysis of these states can afford to ignore the systems of governance that existed before the pivot from developmental to environmental state.

# 7.4 Choosing Where to Depend

I argue that ideas about competition-based economic self-reliance and the regulatory approach taken by a typical developmental state are ill-suited to the purposes of environmental management and sustainability. Instead of relying solely on a simplistic division of labor that merely emphasizes exchangeability, what we require instead is a nuanced network of dependencies that fosters balance and mutual interdependence. I arrived at this conclusion after considering the undercurrents of many increasingly acute global problems, from terrorism and refugee crises to global warming and inequality. Are these undercurrents not caused by our lingering attachment to the values of our developmental states of convention: competition and self-reliance? The problem with excessive competition is that it obscures the basic conditions for life: cooperation and reliance on others. When systemic disparities and equality are rendered invisible, they become easily overlooked and dismissed.

The premise of competition is that resources are scarce and people must therefore fight to take what they need from others. Economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi argued that human economies are characterized by their dependence on nature; the assumption of scarcity is a logical twist that only started making sense *after* countries adopted market economies (Polanyi 1944). Without our noticing, mounting competition made humans more dependent on their environment, eventually disrupting the systems that kept relationships between people and nature in balance. In Chapter 5, I discussed how traditional societies, which had managed and relied on common goods for generations, were almost invariably destroyed by omnipotent states trying to incorporate local assets into new money-based, state-centric governing systems. The histories of developmental states are a string of dependencies rooted in inequality, subordination and centralized control. A well-discussed example was the policy-driven trend for Latin American countries to specialize in a small range of particular commodities, which made them excessively dependent on foreign trade, giving rise to dependency theories (Katz 2023).

It became common sense at one point to argue that dependency is a purely negative condition in which one’s autonomy and self-determination are curtailed by subordination to the interests of other, often more powerful, entities. The obvious and necessary cure for such dependence was independence and self-reliance. Before long, it became clear that in the context of economic development, independence can also lead to isolation. Still, the primacy of competition and independence remained. Western-style ideas about development continued to expand their influence thanks to self-corrective mechanisms that allowed them to adapt whenever and wherever their inherent problems became too acute.

In a sense, the history of development is not one of grand technological innovation but of gradually rediscovering how humans depend on each other. A growing focus on gender helped people rediscover gender-based interdependencies (Pearson 2005). Similarly, the “discovery” of environmental problems raised awareness that, unlike what was previously thought, natural resources are neither free nor endlessly abundant. Increasingly frequent natural disasters reacquaint people not only with their dependence on nature but also with the mutual dependence between states and communities. Still, the current pinnacle of development thought, the Sustainable Development Goals, barely engages with the question of how people should relate to each other. Each society must discover for itself what “good” dependency might look like in a local context. Mutual dependency between the state and community exists alongside dependencies between people, groups and society.

Is this “good” interdependence something we can define? The focus of this book has been on stakeholders who have to deal with the pressures exerted by environmental states. The cases I described involved multiple axes of interdependence between a range of actors that would be very difficult to navigate for states whose power is based on extreme control or despotism. The problem here is not that there are many stakeholders but rather the relationships between them. Individuals typically belong to multiple societies or systems simultaneously, and communication technology expands this capacity exponentially. The balance between these entities is only lost when one of them grows so dominant that the system or culture it represents starts interfering with the other entities to which people belong. When the resulting frictions and discrepancies start negatively affecting communities, inversion follows.

Economist Amartya Sen proposed that a society can only be just when people can choose for themselves the most important identities out of all the options available to them (Sen 2010). However, most people never have a say in the institutional framework established by their country that regulates who gets access to natural resources or how the environment is administered. This is why it is so important to foster a multi-layered structure consisting of various intermediary organizations—from community unions to citizen networks—spanning various overlapping regions.

Developmental states prioritize competition and self-reliance in their quest to overcome any dependencies, including traditional human relations. I argue that environmental states should focus on the quality of the various interdependencies that connect their stakeholders. Some scholars argue that the fastest way to reduce poverty would be to prioritize the “good” interdependencies that serve to guarantee people’s survival, rather than continue to isolate people as individual social units in their capacity as “productive laborers” (Ferguson 2015). Consider Japan, where a declining birth rate combined with low immigration will certainly continue to increase the proportion of the population who are reliant on government aid due to old age. Interdependencies must work to support individual self-reliance, but success will depend on how we rebuild a network of mutual reliance.

In the past, many rural areas had a strained relationship with the state, which mostly consisted of governments coming in to take resources in the form of forced labor, taxes, or “gifts” of local products. With the advent of democracy, governments began to provide returns in the form of education, healthcare, and other public services. In other words, the state’s dependence on its people is made apparent with the taxes, products, and labor that the state demands. These domestic interdependencies are also at the root of competition between nations.

The increased individualism and invisible spread of the division of labor—based on what people can produce and exchange in society—created a fragmented kind of mutual dependence. In modern and postmodern society, we can rely on others, but only to the extent that we are among the “winners” (i.e., we have something productive to offer) in a competitive society.  Herbert Spencer, the best-known proponent of the progress of civilization, emphasized the importance of mutual dependence, though this was mostly forgotten as developmental states elevated individualism. Why? Perhaps because mutual dependence lies mostly in the division of labor that happens on an unconscious level, making it easy to dismiss. After so many years of prioritizing development above environmental policies, we must ask ourselves what kind of interdependencies these ideologies have brought about in our societies. It seems like an opportune moment to bring mutual dependence back to the forefront of discussion to ask whether we should go beyond the dependency based on the division of labor.

The “unit” of dependency must also be scrutinized. Scholars of international politics have devoted a great deal of attention to how self-reliance and mutual dependence interact in the context of international affairs (Yamamoto 1989; Keohane and Nye 2000). However, these studies usually take the nation as the unit of analysis. They have paid little attention to international movements or domestic interdependencies. When we study the history of environmental states, we learn that the process by which nations attempt to achieve economic independence is closely intertwined with internal mechanisms of dependency that connect the state and society. All aspects of policies to combat climate change—from climate monitoring to the development of technology for climate change adaptation—are entirely dependent on the relationships between experts and the state.

Late-coming environmental states need to juggle the requirements of environmental protection and economic development at the same time. For them, any nature-focused interventions will also immediately affect the economy. Inversion will continue until we develop a thorough understanding of the ways we depend on both nature and external economic forces. Societies need to learn to work with both.

# 7.5 Possible Counterarguments

In the previous chapters, I discussed a wide range of examples of state interference curtailing people’s ability to live their normal daily lives. This may lead some readers to conclude that environmental states are quite simply “bad” and something to be avoided. However, those affected by the machinations of environmental states are the ones who will determine whether these government intrusions have unwelcome effects. This is why the policy recommendations I provide based on environmental state theory are so singularly focused on retaining—and perhaps enhancing—citizens’ abilities to respond to government policies as they deem necessary. To further contextualize my argument, it may be useful to highlight some potential arguments against the inversion thesis.

First, my argument may irritate environmentalists who have been frustrated with the slow progress of environmental policies. Many would argue that it is impossible to protect nature if governments do not take the initiative. The harms that state policies inflict on some people must be considered unavoidable collateral damage for the greater good of fighting to preserve the environment. I argue that this position reveals a power structure in which the suffering of some groups is easily accepted—or worse, is never even considered. Yet I agree that, with all the potential risks of environmental states, inaction is not an option. Governments cannot simply watch as forests fall, citizens choke on polluted air, landscapes fill with trash, water quality deteriorates, and climate temperatures continue to rise. There is an element of inversion in passively watching problems escalate when solutions are available. However, that should not blind us to the possible harm of environmental policies, especially when peripheral regions are inhabited by communities that have, by and large, not benefited much from development.

A second major counterargument against this book’s analysis is that inversion is a necessary evil. Commentators might say that environmental destruction is now so dramatic that the time for debate has passed. With the survival of humanity at stake, is it not defensible to implement conservation measures first and worry about democracy later? This argument is related to “environmental authoritarianism,” the idea that authoritarian governments, like those in China and Vietnam, may be able to tackle environmental problems more efficiently (Beeson 2010). I will not deny that, in some cases, authoritarian approaches may indeed be more efficient than taking the democratic route. Authoritarian governments may have an easier time developing integrated conservation policies promptly (Gilley 2012). However, this dilemma requires a longitudinal analysis of inversion, which reveals that when states impose rules for the “national interest,” they include or exclude people from the benefits of these new policies, too often overlooking fair treatment of the locals. The result is the widening of existing disparities among the citizens.

Thirdly, some say that if conservation is left to local communities, people may choose to focus on the wrong goals or use the wrong means to achieve them. It is true in the 1990s, when countries across the region began establishing “community” forests, fisheries, and irrigation projects, many such projects failed to shift power to communities or were unsuccessful in conserving vital resources (Agrawal and Gibson 1999: Kurauchi et al., 2006). To this, I argue that all conservation measures, even those taken on a global scale, have direct effects on some communities, even if not immediately visible. Those who are most impacted by changes in environmental and conservation policies deserve to be involved in decisions made about their futures.

There are reasons why one of my observations, recounted in the introduction of this book—where climate education was provided to Loas people who could not read and write—left me feeling uneasy. Local communities received instruction about some aspects of the relationship between people and nature and were led to believe that they could expect gifts from city dwellers. Yet they did not receive information that could lead to urgently needed improvements in their healthcare and basic general education. I could not help but feel that these communities were not being offered the right to refuse outside intervention in their environment and were being plied with superficial “aid” instead. When communities have enough knowledge to make informed choices about their circumstances, and the consequences of their choices are their own, their decisions should be respected. This is the case even when outside experts think communities’ chosen goals or methods are wrong. The problem is that in environmental states, most government interventions happen without people in peripheral regions receiving anything close to sufficient information about what is happening, let alone being offered meaningful choices.

When the people whose lives are most intertwined with the natural environment are excluded, their trust in the government evaporates, and their lack of support renders environmental policies ineffective. The alternative state might nurture a civil society capable of appropriately scrutinizing the next environmental crises. Instead of embracing or dismissing necessary evils, such an approach aims to avoid creating such acute evils in the first place. It is possible, and we should make the effort.

# 7.6 Beyond Dependency

The earlier chapters of this book have considered the multiple ways in which environmental states frequently trigger inversion. Some patterns are obvious. For example, it is not hard to see why rural people react poorly when the government forces them to uproot their lives so it can better protect a forest or the abstract idea of “biodiversity.” However, some patterns of inversion are less self-evident. For example, when local communities become dependent on irrigation infrastructure built by the state, villages lose their ability to regulate their own access to water. At first sight, this loss of autonomy might not look like the bellwether of inversion that it really is.

Developmental states tried to fix the negative consequences of development, including environmental damage, by preserving existing power structures. Environmental states do the same when they try to make problems disappear by simply making technology more efficient or innovative. Of course, improved efficiency and increased innovation often do help mitigate environmental degradation. However, we cannot offset increases in total resource consumption by making particular technologies more efficient because the proliferation of those technologies is inseparable from the requirement to use more resources. Such superficial solutions will not reduce pressures on the global environment, nor will they give a voice to the people who experience the ill effects of inversion. We must instead reconsider our singular focus on development, and the social systems we have built in support of that goal. It is thus worth questioning what is really required to prevent inversion in policies.

Even at various stages of their development, development states prized wealth production above questioning the purpose of development. The question was “How do we become rich,” and never “What does it mean to be rich?” We must not repeat the mistakes of the past and never forget why sustainability and conservation became the major issues of our time. This book is a reminder that sloganeering about politically palatable environmental policies has real consequences for real communities. If we focus only on solving each specific problem, we will remain stuck where we are, playing “whack-a-mole” with other problems that will continue to pop up while we search for “solutions.”

Environmental states emerge when people delegate their duty and right to protect nature to the government. Seeing this play out in environmental states around the world provides us with a unique opportunity to reconsider our relationship with our natural environment. It is true that we no longer possess the option to not adapt our societies to our changing environment. The pace at which that environment is changing and the natural disasters that come with it compel us to act. Yet, while environmental states claim to act in service of a future in which we all respect our environment, they simultaneously narrow the options from which individual citizens can realistically choose. We learned throughout the previous chapters that this process comes with changes to how humans depend on each other, not just how we depend on nature. The difficulty is having the confidence and knowledge to act slowly and effectively rather than quickly and efficiently with regard to the wrong problems. The latter is the approach currently being taken— and is the one that leads to inversion.

It may be appropriate to end this book with my thoughts on the nature of human dependence. The idea of dependency assumes a dichotomized worldview made up of those who depend and those who are dependent. The involved agents may shift and change, but this dichotomized framework remains. The fundamental “renewal” of dependency demands that we change this worldview.

Let us go back to history again. The first non-Eurpoean to win the nobel prize in literature, an Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) , was invited to Japan in 1916. His visits to Japan occurred precisely when Japan was attempting to break out and pursue independence from the Western powers. It is worth recalling Tagore’s advice to Japan, which was unfortunately offered in vain as Japan pursued an unfortunate trajectory of war and self-destruction through the 30 years following his visit (Tagore 1916):

What is still more dangerous for Japan is not this imitation of the outer features of the West, but the acceptance of the motive force of the Western civilization as her own…I can see her motto, taken from science, “Survival of the fittest” writ large at the entrance of her present-day history—the motto whose meaning is, “Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others;” the motto of the blind man, who only believes in what he can touch, because he cannot see… The moral law, which is the greatest discovery of man, is the discovery of this wonderful truth, that man becomes all the truer, the more he realizes himself in others.

Tagore problematizes the popular dichotomy of “us” and “them,” which fuels nationalism and the essentialization of culture (Said 1981). An interesting analogy can be made here now with the rise of environmental states. The idea of “realizing oneself in others” is not just about going beyond the conventional human and environment dichotomy but also questioning how people or governments—i.e., various political categories *within* humans must be renewed to realize each and everyone’s will. Debates about climate and environment, after all, are debates about how we relate to each other.