

Title: Rural Poverty, Environmental Degradation and the Role of the Church

Author: Roger B. Conover (Azusa Pacific University)

Abstract:

This paper examines the linkages between poverty and environmental conditions in rural areas. It describes the vicious cycle that exists between poverty and degradation of the physical capacity of the land. It also examines the role of the Church, both local and global, in helping to break that vicious cycle. It then presents the case of Floresta USA, a Christian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) attempting to address these issues in developing countries.

An introduction to the paper will discuss the reinforcing cycle of rural poverty and environmental degradation. Environmental degradation leads to the reduction of rural incomes and the worsening of poverty conditions, while the need for expanded incomes puts additional stress on the land. The introduction also discusses the basic theological principles that bear on this issue. These include the universal value of humankind as created in the image of God, and the intrinsic value of God's creation; the fallenness of humankind which has broken the relationships between humankind and God, each other and the creation; and the capability of the redemptive work of Christ to restore these broken relationships. From this basis, the role of the Church is discussed.

The second section of the paper details a model of the linkages between rural economic conditions and environmental degradation. This model draws on Conover (2005), which addresses these linkages on a full national level. The model specifies the relationship between environmental conditions and rural incomes, and delineates the impact of low rural incomes on the environment. In this way we can identify specific places where the redemptive and prophetic voice of the Church can speak effectively to try to bring change.

The final section of the paper will provide a descriptive case study of Floresta USA, a Christian NGO which uses a microenterprise development approach (together with microfinance and appropriate technology) to change the relationship between rural incomes and the environment. This organization has projects in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Tanzania and Thailand. The case describes the organizational mission, program structure, integration of theological principles and education, and program successes and failures. This case is based on interviews with staff and members of the Board of Directors, both current and past. It also draws on the review of internal organizational documents from Floresta USA. Further research beyond this paper will be needed for a more complete analytical case study, including structured field interviews with Floresta partner organizations and participants in the programs abroad.

Conover, R. B. (2005). "Sustainable Development in an Era of Globalization: Conflicts and Complementarities." *Forum on Public Policy*, v1, n1.